

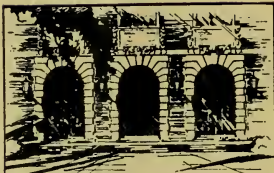


THE RAILWAY FOUNDLING.



By

· NOMAD ·

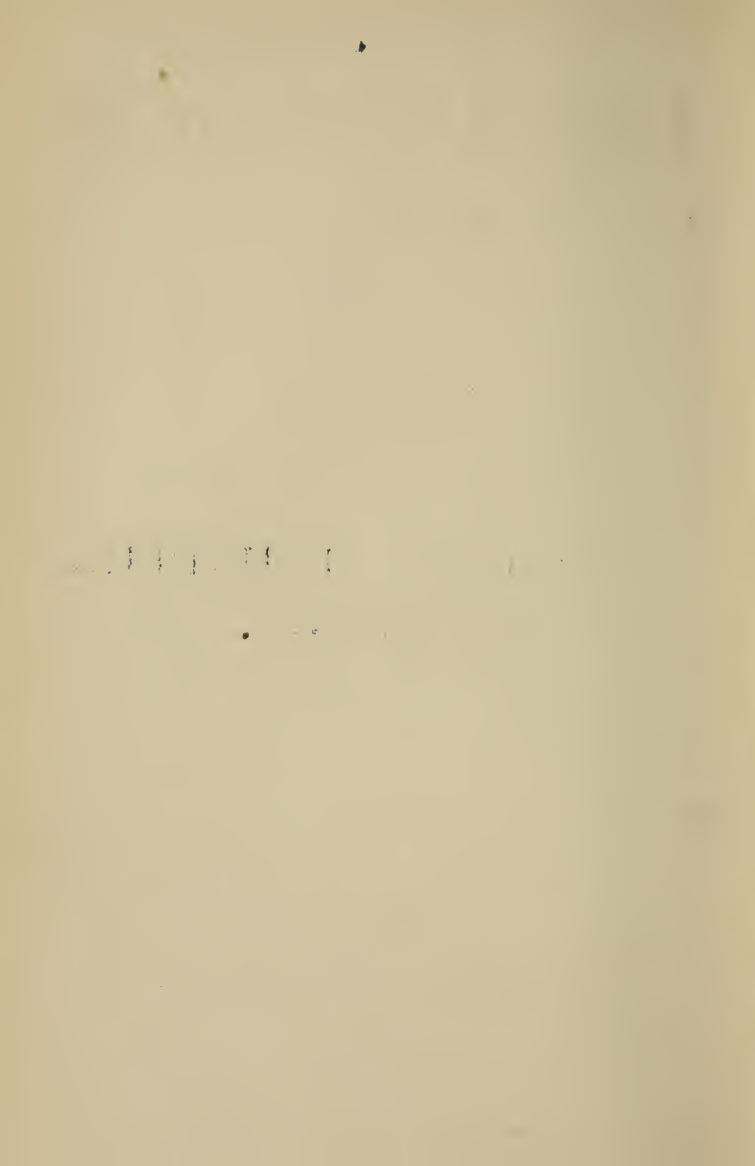


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A RAILWAY FOUNDLING.

VOL. II. .



2nd July 1893

A RAILWAY FOUNDLING.

(IN THREE VOLUMES.)

BY

NOMAD,

AUTHOR OF "THE MILROYS," "OWLSCROFT," ETC.

" There's something in this world amiss
Shall be unriddled by-and-by;
There's somewhat flows to us in life,
But more is taken quite away."—*Tennyson*.

VOL. II.

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A RAILWAY FOUNDLING.



CHAPTER I.

“HAPPY THE WOOING THAT’S NOT LONG
A-DOING.”

FRANK ELLABY found himself in an unusually thoughtful frame of mind, not to say an absent one, as he stood by his mother’s side, while she received her guests, many of whose faces he recognised as having seen that morning in church.

The friendly manner in which they accepted him as a fresh addition to that new circle already established amongst them, pleased him, and equally gratifying was it to learn the high estimation in which his people were held. Such kindness is infectious, and his mood lightened perceptibly under its genial influence.

Presently, when the long room was well filled, a small hand stole into his, and looking down, he saw Annabel Westgate.

“Dorothy told me to come,” she explained, in an appealing little whisper. “She said I was to take care of you for her, and tell you who all the folks were.”

“Come along, then, Brownlocks, we will get out of this crowd,” he whispered in return. “Let’s make for that far window, and then we shall have a good post of vantage.”

He was glad to have her companionship. He had been immensely amused by her very serious attitude as the youngest bridesmaid, and he could talk freely to this “child-woman,” as he mentally termed her, while she had taken to him at once, as her dear Dorothy’s favourite brother.

“Now, then, Brownlocks,” he said, when they were snugly ensconced in the high window recess, “who is that just coming in, to whom my sister is now talking?”

The child turned her head toward the

door, and answered, "Countess Smalkington and her daughter Lady Gwendoline."

"Ah! I thought so. The old lady appears to be very fond of my pretty sister, or does she kiss all the pretty girls?" as that operation was being performed.

"She kisses me—sometimes."

"Ah," smoothing her rich dark hair, "but you are scarcely what they call a pretty girl yet. Does she kiss Miss Trench, for instance?"

"Which?" asked the child.

"The pretty one, not the one who is dancing with Alec."

"No, I don't expect she likes Miss Trench."

"Indeed; but she is a very lovely girl, Brownlocks."

"Yes, but she is not proud and smart and witty, and Countess Smalkington likes proud people, and people who say sharp things."

"But Mab is not a proud person, you queer little oddity."

"Oh, yes, she is, very."

Frank laughed ; he had heard something of the internecine war between these two, and something of the child's strange history, so curiosity prompted him to say, "Then, I suppose, Mr. Dyketon likes forward people?" drawing her round by her thin shoulders to see that gentleman talking animatedly to Mab.

A little frown puckered the white forehead, and the small, firm mouth quivered as the answer came slowly, "I do not know."

She stared at him with such a troubled expression that a great pity for this quaint, lonely child entered his heart. "What peculiar eyes!" he thought, "and what sharp intelligence!" yet there was nothing about her of that repulsive precocity which renders some children of the same age such abominations; instead, a dignified self-command possessed her, even now that she was under the unusual excitement of a long day of pleasure and fatigue.

He could see how tired in body and over-

strung in nerve she was, yet how bravely she battled down some inward emotion that threatened to overcome her. He drew her to him, and asked gently, "Do you not want him to like her, dear?"

For one brief instant the intent eyes met his with grave perplexity, but, divining his meaning, a flash of scorn darted womanly defiance at him, then as if the effort had been too much for the childish frame, she crept to his side with a tired-out sigh. No woman could have better controlled herself—she would not sob, though her limp little body was convulsed with suppressed passion as it lay in the protecting clasp of Frank's strong arm.

"Please," she said to him, with touching simplicity, "I like you—you are kind and good to me, like Dorothy, and I do not want to say rude things to you; and, please, don't talk about Mab. Mr. Dyketon does sometimes, and it makes me bad and wicked, so wicked." She was almost sobbing now.

“Then we won’t talk about her, Brownlocks.”

But the child went on excitedly, “He is mine, you know—all mine: he told me so before she ever came here.”

The small fingers were clenched, and Frank’s pity deepened as she added through her firmly set teeth, “And I will never let her have him away from me; he is mine, and I never give up anything I want so badly to keep, would you?” she questioned, shaking with a passion she could not subdue.

“No, child, I would not,” answered Frank Ellaby, bent on soothing the excitement he had raised; and fearful lest a scene should ensue, he stooped down and kissed her very tenderly, saying, “It will all come right, darling: everything does, if we leave it alone and wait.”

An easy philosophy, Frank Ellaby; but the child listened eagerly. “Does it?” she whispered joyously, with a sudden change of humour that startled him, and then she put

her pink-clad arms round his neck and returned his kiss, as if he had given her some real comfort which she could take right home to her poor little jealous heart.

Frank Ellaby was fond of children, but this one fascinated him more than usual, and he thought within himself that one day her life would work out its strange beginning. Such a child could have no common blood in her veins, and was not likely to have an uneventful existence with her marked individuality and striking beauty, the germs of which were visible under the sharp outlines of face and figure.

Just then Mab came up with Madoline Trench, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes as she remarked, "I have been telling Maddy how fearfully nervous you are, Frank, and asking her to help you out among so many strange people."

He took the programme from Madoline's hand with mock gravity, and when he handed it back, Mab was gone, and Madoline found his initials opposite every third dance.

"Pardon me," in answer to her amazed exclamation, "I understood my sister to say you would help me out, and I always feel—so awfully nervous about every third dance."

Madoline, by no means unconventional by nature or upbringing, was undecided what to do in the emergency, but was spared immediate action by another gentleman, well-known to her, taking the card hastily and with a self-satisfied smirk scribbling some hieroglyphics for two waltzes in succession.

"An old promise, Miss Trench," he said, rushing on his quest for other partners.

"Who is *that*?" asked Frank, with rather a grand air. "The idea of a fellow vaulting round a room in that style, and coolly sticking his name down for two of the best dances in succession!"

"Oh," answered Madoline, frankly, "we all think ourselves lucky to be claimed for one by him, he is such a splendid dancer, and," with a sly smile, "not a bit nervous."

"No, I should say he was spared that infliction."

Maddy stood silent, feeling a shyness creep over her under handsome Frank Ellaby's steady gaze, but recollecting her compact with Mab, she threw it aside by admitting his claim to every third dance.

This arrangement, in being carried out, roused the easily excited surprise of certain people, and a little matronly horror from Mrs. Trench, for Alec and Di had been behaving recklessly in much the same way, whereupon that lady promptly took Miss Di to task, so that in this quarter an amendment was brought about.

Frank had been indulging in "just one waltz" with Mab, and on his joining Mrs. Trench and Madoline, the latter said, "I never realised before, Mr. Ellaby, what a waltz could be. How perfectly you and Mab dance together!"

"I suppose you learnt together," remarked Mrs. Trench; "it makes such a difference."

"Yes," he replied, with a light laugh, "we used to practise severely in a disused attic,

or in the open fields, to Dorothy's music on a comb covered with paper."

"Dear little Mabel, she is so bright and winsome," said Mrs. Trench: "we all think so much of her, and the eccentric old Countess's devotion has ceased to be a nine-days' wonder now."

"She is all that"—Frank said it thoughtfully, as with some reservation—"and she deserves a bright fate, but it does not always follow."

As he led Madoline away for the next dance, he went on, "Do you know, Miss Trench, I have been for weeks past haunted by a beastly dream about Mab."

"A dream!" echoed Madoline.

"Will you have a stroll on the terrace instead of this set?" asked Frank, taking up a thick wrap without waiting for her reply. "Ay, a dream; don't think me foolish if I tell it you, but it will be such a relief. She is always her own dauntless self—gay, smiling, and tantalising—always beautiful too; only that under all this I see and

know that she is *living a dead life*. Seven distinct times I have seen her, as in the flesh, bearing in her hands her own bleeding heart, and *laying it down* at somebody's feet. It is, as I say, a beast of a dream, and you can never imagine how it has worried me.”

“At whose feet,” asked Madoline, with some emotion, and stopping in their slow walk, “does she lay it down?”

“That I cannot tell you. The form, whether a man's or woman's, is there, quite clear to my senses, but shrouded so that no personality asserts itself.”

“What a dreadful dream!”

“Exactly so; and I suppose it is wretchedly stupid of me to allow it to haunt me so; but, you see, it is not that I have only dreamed it once, but so many times, and each alike in every detail. I can hardly tell you why, Miss Trench, but somehow her presence rather increases than dispels it. I do not think I am a fanciful fellow as a rule, but I do not think Mab is happy.”

Madoline was silent.

"Do you?" he inquired. "You are her dearest friend." He almost bent to her level to catch the low answer, "No; I do not think she is."

Walking on again, the two stopped mechanically before the lighted windows, and looking into the room, saw that, standing close to Lady Gwen, while Philip Dyketon near by held the Elf's hand, Māb's face was entirely changed. Intense suffering had taken the place of her habitual brightness, and her general appearance was that of one weary of herself and her surroundings. She was off guard.

"There, Miss Trench," said Frank Ellaby, laying his hand detainingly on her arm, "that is precisely how she always appears in my dream."

"Surely," said Madoline, very earnestly, "if it is so with her, not even Philip Dyketon can resist her, and it is very unselfish of me to *wish* this, for you know how it is with poor Malcolm."

"I saw that; one notices every little circumstance on first coming into fresh scenes."

"He does not care to hide it from anyone," said Madoline. "I believe that whatever her fate may be that his love for her will last his life. It is so sometimes, and oh! I do so wish it could have been!"

"And I wish so, too. Miss Trench, do you believe in fate—or presentiments?"

"I do not know," after a startled pause at his tone. "I think perhaps I do a little."

"Then can you tell me why I kept *this* likeness of *yours* hidden jealously from every eye but my own out there, while I freely showed your sister's to all my friends?"

As he spoke he took the photograph from a small case and held it before her. Madoline knew instinctively that his eyes were fixed on her with the look that had once or twice before laid her, as it were, under his spell, and she could not force herself to answer a word.

"I will tell you," he said, giving rein to

the daring spirit within him, "because the instant I saw it I felt that I was looking at my *future wife*."

Still she did not speak, only shivered as with a sudden chill ; or was it with the abrupt birth of a passion hitherto unknown to her placid nature ?

Her heart leaped within her, and the blood in her veins rushed wildly on, till she thought she must fall under the swirl of giddiness that attacked her.

"I am afraid I have very much shocked you," he said, catching the hands thrown out in weakness. "Or, may I ask," steadying her with his strong grasp on them, "if some day it may be a reality ? Do not answer me now ; only tell me you are not angry with me."

His form was bent, his face very near hers in the soft night, as he waited gravely for the low word, "No."

Not angry. He drew himself up with a great sigh, but did not release the fluttering hands, or take his eyes from the changeful face.

“One more question. Do you or have you ever loved any other man?”

Some women would have resented coquettishly or otherwise such domination as the question so asked implied. Not so Madoline Trench, and she found voice quickly, and answered with absolute truth—

“No, indeed no!”

“Thank God,” he said reverently, “I will win you yet.”

Others came out now to enjoy the less heated air of the terrace, so that these two were no longer secure of the solitude so dear to lovers. A great joy sprang into being at a bound in this girl’s quiet life: she knew, even in that hurried moment, that *it was joy*. No perplexities or doubts assailed her to mar her peace. This man was no stranger to her in seeming fact, and his strong nature already dominated her own in a way that, to her, was sweetness itself. Hers was a gentle, trusting disposition, and her love once given, or better still taken, would be for ever.

She no longer trembled as she was piloted through the crowd on his strong arm, though a maidenly reserve crept into her new-born happiness, and whispered that she ought to be a little shocked, perhaps angry, as he had said ; but she was neither, and Frank, looking down anxiously into her radiant face—for radiant it was, though so shyly sweet—as they returned to the lighted hall, was perfectly satisfied with his choice.

CHAPTER II.

A WEAKNESS OF MR. KELPY'S.

THE clerk of the weather must have been in good humour this year, for the May month fitly merited its old term "merrie." It was left, therefore, to those grumblers of atmospheric wisdom to predict "a wet hay-harvest in consequence."

In this calamity the young people in whose affairs we are interested did not anticipate, but were content to enjoy the present good ; as to the future crops, they might "go hang," as Alec remarked to Di as he helped her to arrange the tennis net on the Grange lawn, "for aught he listed."

Tennis was rampant again in Little Marsdon and its vicinity, although Dorothy Ellaby had given up playing on the plea "she had never really enjoyed it, so that

it was no hardship to devote all her time to the Elf."

This raised a quizzical laugh at her expense, for, as all knew, there was immense reservation in the statement. Clement Danes decidedly disapproved of the game, for some reason best known to himself, while no persuasion could ever induce the Elf to so much as touch a racquet or pick up a ball. Frank Ellaby let no grass grow under his feet in wooing, and met with no more opposition than in Mrs. Trench roundly averring "that a wedding trousseau, especially one for abroad, could not be bundled up in six weeks." Madoline smiled tranquilly at her lover on hearing this, and as Di said, "apparently did not care whether or no she had a trousseau at all, or did she think in her beatific unconcern that one would fall from the skies for her, just because the husband had done so?"

Frank already shared the popularity of his family, and his good nature and strong

will carried all difficulty, so that the love-making went on apace.

For the Ellabys were eminently popular ; even petty jealousy found no peg whereon to hang a grievance. Such carrion was disarmed by the unfailing courtesy shown to all classes and sects alike.

As a family they were noted for their ready hospitality, and in return accepted it freely, countenancing no clique as binding which interfered with their independence of action. There was to them no reason why, because they lunched at the Castle on Wednesday, they should not drink tea on Thursday with Mrs. Snelling, the struggling surgeon's wife. If they assisted the Vicar in his school treat in the Marsdon House Park, that was no hindrance to their giving Mr. Kelpy, on Mrs. Tempest's account, substantial aid with his, held, by Mr. Ellaby's permission, in the grounds of the old Cross farm, rented by him for business purposes.

Thus they would have argued, these cosmopolitan railway folk, had such been

required of them, only that it was not, for people had long since ceased to think anything strange that the Ellabys did, and imperceptibly their own narrow grooves were widened in consequence.

Christmas had been bleak and bitter, and the hearts of the poor in Nincleton and the Marsdons, irrespective of creed, had been gladdened by the carts of wood brought to their doors by Mr. Ellaby's orders. From the same quarter were distributed many such timely gifts for the warming of those frozen hearts (and the hearts of the poor are apt to get frozen when the finger-ends ache by the cold hearth). After one distribution, a spry old woman made it her business to interview Mr. Ellaby as to this impartial benefit.

"Why," she asked, "should them as was chapelers, or wus still nothink at all, have the same, when——"

"When what?" struck in the stern tones, scattering to the wind the volubility of the self-righteous old crone.

She repented of her errand, for she afterwards told how "she felt shrivelled up to nothink and 's mean as dirt, but that the master might a' bin a passon for his reasonin', and she on'y wished she'd never a-carted her old bones to Pendleton Grange for nothink but shame."

But now jubilant spring had driven away winter frosts and cruel snows, lightening hearts whose load is heavier under their reign.

The hedgerows looked gay in their vernal green, the perfume of the new-blown flowers filled the air, while the laburnums in the Grange hollow were a show of loveliness as they shook their golden tassels in the breeze.

Nature needs no changing fashions year by year to enhance her charms, no new trappings to add grace to her renewed life; with her no moiling care harasses the peaceful soul into jealous strivings after some bizarre "effect." The old, old brown of the earth, the ever warm, tender green of the grasses and hedgerows serve her again and again,

and we never tire of them or wish them different. The flowers hunger for no change of colouring, but bloom and re-bloom with joyous content.

The selfsame metallic gleam has ever shone on the rippling burn, while the flowing river dreams not of alteration. The old tints mix and intermix in the fleecy clouds, and the blue of the heavens in its ever-varying shades is beautiful in our eyes. The whole earth yields her bounty with unerring regularity the while she fills our souls with this loveliness, and with this loveliness and unchange is peace and rest.

We yearn for no *change* in Nature, yet we stubbornly shut our eyes and our senses to her infinite "*patience of example.*"

We clothe our poor bodies in new and varied stuffs, build fresh warehouses, and run riot in high factories and steam appliances, exhausting alike brain and sinew to bring about some new thing which is scarce fully known "to be" ere it is thrown aside, for lo ! another is ready and must come to the birth.

We are, in our poor humanity, like a turbulent stream that must dash, twist, and writhe forward; there is a madness in our blood to get onward and forward, no matter at what cost. We strain every nerve to reach our goal, forgetting that, if we wait, the

“Something in this world amiss
Shall be unriddled by-and-by.”

Why cannot we trust, and wait the issue of that calm By-and-By?

Alas! for “life’s fitful fever,” we cannot, or we do not. Even the birds teach us “content with what is,” yet they seek no new notes for their love-gurges; they always build their nests on the one old pattern, and make “homes” of them with this restful content, on account of the happiness within their shelter, vexing themselves with no ambitious rivalling. The moorhen would not vacate the seclusion of her cool, sedgy, rush-shaded home for that of the aspiring rooks, merely because in it they are so much higher up in the world. Nor do the rooks caw so loudly because

of their altitude, but simply because they are satisfied with their lot, and not for any of the unworthy irritancies we mortals evince when we caw, caw, caw in our little social scale. And what a poor, rotten scale it is ! and what a hoarse, despairing crank in the "caws" of the climbers who pass us in the race ! for, after all, they do not find things so much the better on that higher branch.

"God's fair sun shines on all alike."

"Yes," they admit that, but they cannot enjoy it under shade of a still higher branch than their own. However uncertain and devious the way, the topmost twig must be attained.

"More exposed to winds and rains and shifting lights."

"Perhaps." Only a grudging admittance, this. So humanity, of its own dogged will, goes on its way, stone deaf and adder blind till the awakening.

Now, Little Marsdon was not steeped in such iniquities ; still, it had its carpings, its heartburnings, and its jealous dissatisfactions.

In Mrs. Tempest's opinion, Mr. Kelpy was evincing much weakness in this respect, and being a sensible and very shrewd woman, she often rebelled at his petty complainings. She considered he had been "too lifted up" by the notice some folks had taken of him, and had not the sense to see that it was because the Ellabys had come to him with their frank courtesy and ready help, that others followed suit; that Miss Trench had come to the chapel-school treat, and Mr. Dyketon had talked kindly to him, sending down swings and prizes for the children, and had even come into the field to see what was going on.

Because, forsooth, he had been up to the Grange a time or two on this business or that, and they had given him afternoon tea in simple good faith, the blind—I am afraid she said "fool"—must needs go and spend some of his hard earnings on a set of old gim-crack cups and saucers for himself, as if his landlady's clean china was not good enough. Art, indeed!

She read him thoroughly, and could detect exactly where his shoes pinched : in spite of much real goodness he was inwardly chafing at his social position, and pined secretly after unattainable things. This, to her mind, showed a general weakness of character.

Now, Mrs. Tempest, with her sharp eyes, had discovered of late one thing especially unattainable to which he was aspiring—viz., Miss Mab Ellaby.

This, to her, savoured not of weakness, but of rank, daring presumption, and merited stern rebuke. She was his friend, and as such must put a stop to this sort of thing before any inkling came before his congregation, where he would assuredly find himself lowered in their esteem.

She would save him from humiliation, if it were possible—not that she was at all fond of interfering with other people's business as a rule, but this was an exceptional case wherein a word spoken in season might be an incalculable boon.

At first she had only been pitiful of his

senseless folly, but now the thing was beginning to get wind among the people. "Why, the man must be cracked," she reasoned wrathfully.

Yes, it behoved her to interfere. How many times had she stood between him and her husband's railings against innovations? going sometimes even beyond her conscience in declaring she liked this, that, and the other.

Just now it was the Litany that was being introduced into their service, and in denunciation of which Tempest was loud, as "Papist humbug of vain repetition." Well, having been brought up to Church, she did like it, but there were other things about which she was not so sure, although for the sake of peace she smoothed controversial subjects over. Tempest had turned upon her only last week, when she had said "that for her part she loved the old Church forms," crying out, "Forms! yes, that's it, jest *forms*—written wor-rds read out wi' Popish mumblin's atween 'em

as didn't touch ne'er a heart as heerd 'em ; for his part, give 'im a prayer straight from a man's soul, and a 'sermon extempoor."

As she stood in her shining kitchen, peeling potatoes for the early dinner, she thought in her aggrieved mood somewhat savagely of all this. Her forehead was wrinkled into seamy lines, and her eyebrows nearly met across the high ridge of her nose, while the sensible mouth corners were drawn down as she pecked viciously at the specks in the vegetable she handled with a snick as if they had no business to have grown so.

Having placed the potatoes under half a shoulder of mutton within the oven, she shut the door with a little bang, and ejaculated "Mercy bless the man, what high falutin' folly will get into his wind-bag of a head next, I wonder? Miss Mab, indeed! I'm sure I wonder he didn't go for Lady Juliana up at the Castle; and to think that that gadderer, Mrs. Tompkins, as he lodges

with, getting hold of it through picking up of his bits of rotten poetry. 'Fairy Mab,' indeed; I'll 'fairy Mab' him."

Here the good woman whisked herself into the scullery, but whisked herself out again, muttering, "Bless my heart and soul, what fools men are! But I suppose they're made so without much choice o' their own in the first place, on'y some is born so and never recovers theirselves, while others, thank goodness, do leaven their foolery with some common-sense."

Implements in hand, she proceeded to clear the bedrooms, tramping round with much unusual noise to the accompaniment of her outspoken thoughts. "Sakes alive! to think of that poor deluded idjeot hatching such a plot as this! Miss Mab, indeed! and he told me himself his father was a small grocer in Sheffield, and that he was educated by charity, and had risen by sheer hard work—and no blame that, but credit. All the same, Bishops—and I take it that he'll be

aiming at that next—ain't made of such kind of stuff."

At this point the feathers of the cashier's bed had a tremendous stirring up. "So tire-some of him as it was to have the mattress always on top and the thickest blanket at bottom. She hadn't common patience with such new-fangled ideas, but she'd see if her best feather-bed should get lumpy, for all that."

After a regular onslaught, she sat down to recover breath, "and after all, poor young fellow, I do pity him," she continued, "for he is honest, and slaves himself to death a'most among 'em, and gets as often as not more kicks nor ha'pence ; then, another thing, he ain't strong, and that cough of his goes right to my heart ; and he's got no mother to put him up to which way the wind blows, so to say, among the meanness of one thing and t'other. After all, a man hasn't much chance without some sharp, capable woman round about him, if 'tis only a sister ; and," she added, with additional thoughtfulness, "that

tiresome girl has got a way of smiling into a man's eyes that's like enough to befool a stronger head than our young minister's. She only means it in innocence, pretty dear; still, all the same, *it's tryin'*, and she little knows what softies such men are to see in it magnitudes of their own vain makin's."

Here she started up wrathfully. "Drat it! If that meat isn't burnin', now! Mercy on us, if one could get along without the plague o' eatin' and dressin' for a time, life would be better worth livin'." Once more the oven was shut up with a bang, and Mrs. Tempest poked up the fire with a great deal of vehemence. "A pretty kettle of fish all this is, and simmering too fast by half, if Mrs. Tompkins's tongue goes waggin' round the village; but trust Susan Tempest to put a sprag in the lid afore it comes to boiling point. Yes, Miss Mab, you mustn't get off scot-free, neither; no use putting the collar on only one horse—fair's fair, and I must have a talk to you, my dear, and a pretty straight one, if I have to walk over to the Grange to get it."

But this trouble was saved her, for before she could get to her upstairs work again, the wheels of the gad-about scraped her curbstone, and she went out to see—Mr. Kelpy descending from it.

A pretty kettle of fish indeed !

“ I have been playing good Samaritan,” cried Mab. “ Mr. Kelpy was looking so tired and done up as I passed him on the road that I picked him up. I have been telling him he works too hard.”

Mrs. Tempest looked grim, but what could she say to vent her present humour in face of the girl’s brightness and the young minister’s look of flushed happiness ?

“ Poor dear fool ! ” she muttered to herself, though she was distressed to see how ill he looked.

But she was not the woman to shrink from a disagreeable duty, and was the more impelled to this one by Mab, who was smiling into the young man’s face in her most reprehensible manner, while she said, “ Now, remember, Mr. Kelpy, it will show a decided

want of spirit on your part if you do not boldly ask for this favour you want. Nothing risk, nothing win."

He stood beside the small carriage, in his rather shabby coat and much-frayed collar, and had to cough painfully before he could answer. "Would *you* consider *this* so—a want of spirit?" came at last.

"Certainly," said Mab, remarking for the first time Mrs. Tempest's grim silence, and that her lips were drawn within her front teeth in an ominous way, which all the Grange children knew meant a "wiggling" for somebody. *This* was only a trifling matter in regard to some parish work which the two had been discussing; but Mrs. Tempest, hearing only the fag-end of the conversation, took it to mean much more than it really did. Mr. Kelpy, following the direction of his tormentor's eyes, met those of Mrs. Tempest fixed on him with a sternness for which he was totally unprepared, and his own fell nervously, while a sense of humiliation and shame crept over him. A guilty conscience

needs no accuser, and the thought that surged through him, heating his very blood, was, "How had this member of his flock found out his carefully guarded secret?" For find it out he could see she had, and all Mab's dazzling coquetry could not recover his sudden loss of nerve-power.

Mab Ellaby, unconscious of the freemasonry going on between these two, and anxious to be rid of Mr. Kelpy, in order that she might learn "dear old Susan's" grievance, went on merrily, "Now go and fortify yourself with dinner, Mr. Kelpy; and then do exactly as I tell you, and if you care to come up to-morrow, we will talk it over at tea-time—five o'clock, you know."

"And I am hoping you will come and have a cup of tea with me and George this evening, sir," Mrs. Tempest added a little pointedly, neither withdrawing her personal friendship at this trying moment, nor concealing her disapproval of his folly—disapproval which he could read only too plainly in her steady, unflinching gaze.

His first impulse was resentment, and an inclination to rebel at being thus lowered to his proper rung of the social ladder—not that the woman's tone was disrespectful, but those dainty teas at the Grange had intoxicated his senses, although, to be sure, this was the first time he had been bidden to come—hitherto he had called on various business, and the tea had been an addendum.

But he liked Mrs. Tempest, and, to his honour be it said, his better nature triumphed in time to prevent any show of resentment, as he remembered her many kindnesses to him, and he answered in his own peculiar sweetness of voice, "that he would come with pleasure, most certainly." Then, when he would have gone—simply raising his hat to them—that tiresome girl must needs hold out her hand, "as if," thought Mrs. Tempest, provoked, "she could not leave well enough alone."

There was a small boy always in and about this house, whose duty it was apparently to

be at everybody's beck and call, and to completely satisfy no one.

He did what Mrs. Tempest denominated "odds," and now she called him very grimly, "Come you here, Jack, and hold the pony while Miss Ellaby comes in."

"I can't, Susan, really"—sometimes the girls dropped into the familiar Christian names, principally when conciliation was to the fore—"I have to get back at once, and only called to—but, Susan, are you vexed about something? Is anything the matter?"

"A great deal, or will be afore long," answered Mrs. Tempest, giving Mab her hand to help her out of the carriage, in a manner that plainly showed she did not intend letting her off.

A half-guilty feeling stole over the girl as she followed Mrs. Tempest into the best parlour, albeit she was far from guessing the whole significance of the case.

A good half-hour passed while the small boy stood at Gyp's head, and then Miss Mab Ellaby came out quickly, her pretty face

heated, and an awakened penitence in her demeanour. She kissed Mrs. Tempest before driving away, and said, in a hurried whisper, "Do my eyes look red now?"

"No, dearie, and don't cry no more about it." Then to the boy, who stood innocently staring, "Go you in, Jack, to the oven, and mind that meat don't get scorched, neither—no, my dear, it's all right, and I'll see that nothing further comes of it, poor young fellow; only it's no use, child, for me to talk sense and reason to him, and you to undo it all by encouraging him in his nonsensical foolery."

"But I didn't know. I—," and once more the tears of vexation were ready to start, "and I will take care to be out when he comes to-morrow."

"'Twill be as well; only I don't expect he'll go and hush up now, dearie, Perhaps I have been a bit hard on you, but it was no use to mince matters if I hoped to stop the mischief, and I shan't to him presently, I can tell you."

Mab leaned out to say, with burning cheeks, some last words, to which Susan Tempest made rapid answer—

“Never you fear ; he’ll not know from me that *you* even guess such trumpery, and the rest is in your own hands. You’ve no call to be snaggy nor unpleasant, but you can stop smiling at him and bewildering his senses. Men like him don’t always know that it means just nothing, and more cruel mischief’s done than was ever thought likely. Now go along home, Miss Mab, and don’t trouble any more, but let it be a sort of lesson to you all your life—’tis never good nor honest to play with edge tools, however innocent-like, when it hurts the weakest side, as in this case, for instance, it ’ud be bound to do ”

CHAPTER III.

COUNTESS SMALKINGTON IN PARK LANE.

ONE day, when the London season was at its height, Countess Smalkington suddenly announced to her daughters her intention of inviting Mab Ellaby for a fortnight.

Both of them looked up in surprise, for this was the first they had heard of any such intention—not that their mother was in the habit of consulting them on such matters.

“For the ball, mamma?” asked Gwen. (The one ball they always gave was coming off the following week.)

As she spoke she glanced at her sister, to receive in reply only a disdainful shrug of the shoulders.

“Yes; she’d enjoy it,” said the old lady, peering over her spectacles.

In the silence that ensued, the fluff of the delicate silks that Lady Ju was working could

be distinctly heard as she flicked out a number from a fresh pocket from which to select another shade. Gwen, who was always the one to fill in awkward pauses of this kind, often to her cost, felt this was a very awkward one indeed, and noting her mother's expression, spoke again. "Of course, mamma, we shall be very pleased to have her."

"Hum, I don't know about the *we*, Gwen."

But Lady Juliana, who never put herself out of the way to avoid domestic storms, vouchsafed no response beyond making her shoulders repeat the elevating process—this time it was more expressive of a tolerance of that which was inevitable rather than of disdain.

Poor Gwen, ever watchful to save an outbreak of the Countess's caustic temper, as such gentle, self-sacrificing souls always are, said, "Well, I am sure *I* shall be very glad ; and she can have the blue chintz room."

"Hum ; and she'd better come up at once,

for I take it ball dresses from Muston's ain't desirable." (Muston's was the principal draper's at Marsdon.)

"Yes," answered Gwen, wishing that Ju would not be so selfish as to leave her to do all the talking, when she knew mamma was in one of those humours when to essay conversation at all was always more or less hazardous.

The Countess was knitting, and the peculiar click of her needles was a warning which her daughters did not despise. That there was something simmering within her mind conducive to discomfort was certain, for they were clicking ominously now. At her next speech Lady Juliana was decidedly relieved, and breathed more freely—to tell the truth, she had expected something quite different.

"Her coming, Gwen, won't hurt your chance with Philip Dyketon; you ought to see plainly enough that you have no more now than you had years ago," and, after a purl stitch, the sock was tweaked round to commence another parallelogram, with a

twitching, nervous movement of the thin hands which were so suggestive of birds' claws.

"Oh, mamma, I thought this subject had long since dropped—that it was dead," said poor unselfish Gwen, thus cruelly brought to bay.

Lady Ju laughed.

"Hum," replied her mother, with a suspicious look at Lady Ju which forebode mischief.

"Please, mamma, do let it die," Gwen continued, with a weak sentimentality in her tone that irritated the old lady anew.

"Pshaw! my dear, what has never lived can't *die*, that I know of. As I say, the child's coming here can't hurt you, and as for Ju, I suppose her Ritualistic craze can go on as well with a little stir in the house as it does now."

Here Lady Ju started as if a pin had run into her, and realised that her turn had come.

"And I presume the Honourable and Reverend Theodosius Deraclose, such a name

as 'tis, won't fall off in his devotion to rank unless money was the temptation, which in this case it ain't—the lust of the eye, in the form of beauty and youth, don't count with 'em, does it, Ju?"

But that lady made no reply, knowing full well she was powerless to cope with her antagonist.

"I'm sure," grinned the Countess, with malicious enjoyment, "I thought they went in for total abstinence—celibacy and general self-denial."

Lady Juliana's brow lowered, for her temper was thoroughly roused, so far as a slow, sulky one can be said to be roused. There was a palpable sneer in her cold voice as she observed, "There is no need whatever to be profane, mamma, or to make a vulgar mockery of holiness which you do not even comprehend."

"The Lord forbid," echoed the wicked old heathen, piously, with a comical grimace at Gwen, and the knitting needles flew along with a merrier click—her ill-humour was

working off. "There, Ju, don't be a fool; at your age, it ain't seemly; besides, it'll come awkward at confession—I hear you have got so far in saintliness already, or in tomfoolery, whichever you like to call it. I only wonder, child, what you can fudge up to confess, for I don't fancy you've much that need burden your conscience—one, two, three, and purl. Thanks to your lack of wit, which sometimes supplies a deficiency in looks, both of you have had little enough to disturb the even calm of your existences—one can scarce call it life."

Gwen was in for the pin-pricking again, and turned hot and cold accordingly, envying her sister her dignified repose; for Ju had battled down her rising ire as became her Christian principles, and was placidly drawing her silks in and out as if nothing had happened.

"I should say, now, for young women of your station, each with a fair share of what with a little management might have been beauty, you have led tolerably undis-

turbed existences. I take it, though, that Defoe is about right in saying a woman is the better for having a spice of the devil in her, but he seems to have passed you over. Pah!" she continued, as neither of them spoke, "I was never a beauty myself, and, as you know, blood was not my strong point, but I always had men at my feet—I *lived*. I was as poor as Job, too, and might have simply daundered through life as you have done, had I been as content with its milk and water. Why, you neither of you *realise* what its cakes and ale are—and I had no mother to look to for help—I helped myself—one, two, three, and purl."

Gwen's tears were flowing now, as they generally did at her mother's bitter and somewhat coarse jibes on this vexed topic; but Juliana worked at her Church embroidery persistently, apparently unruffled, and a finely developed cross was growing under the bony fingers as the result of her exertions.

"Oh! oh! oh! Mamma, it is so wicked of

you to taunt us like this for what we cannot help."

The Countess laughed with real heartiness at Gwen's truthful way of asserting an uncontrovertible fact.

Thus Gwen, with her soft, plastic nature, always failed to parry the maternal shafts of satirical scorn, and never succeeded, as her elder sister did, in gauging the exact source of the stream.

But of this failure she was densely unconscious, and took everything *au littéral*, gravely or sentimentally, as the case might be.

She was not even warned off by that hearty laugh, but went on sobbing out, "I am sure—I would have had—Philip Dyketon over and over again——"

"Once would have been quite enough to satisfy me, Gwen, I confess," replied her mother, with a sudden change of mood, letting the sock fall into her lap. "It is a sore point with me to think that, with all your opportunities, you have both tried

your level best—such a poor little best as it is—to fail; and for a mere simple little country lassie to succeed——”

“I am not so sure,” broke in Lady Ju, “that Miss Mab Ellaby *has* succeeded.” The slight sneer and little titter accompanying this remark did not tend to conciliate the old lady, who was, in her own way, suffering from an old wound caused by disappointed hopes.

Philip Dyketon had been in town nearly a month, and in constant attendance on them, but she could see—as what in point of fact did she not see?—that although poor silly Gwen was living once in beatitude, he would as lief talk to her as to either of her girls. He liked them both as old friends and country neighbours, nothing more. Gwen’s faded face could ill-conceal her pleasure at his approach, but there was no answering light on his, and so the shrewd old worldling determined to open Gwen’s eyes, and by what more efficient means than by having Mab Ellaby up? She

would come amongst them so gay and sparkling that her advent would clear the clouds of Ritualistic sanctity and sentimental fooldom which were daily becoming more irksome.

And then the Countess was really fond of the girl, and a little of her sprightliness might be healthy for them all—a species of tonic.

It was very trying at times to live with the old lady, because of her vagaries of temper and mood, but she was not bad-hearted—good, in fact, and as wise as she was shrewd and far-seeing, which is saying a very great deal.

“As to matrimony with Philip Dyketon,” continued Lady Ju, reflectively, and rather enjoying the position, “I do not know if, after all, it would be everything that one could desire.”

It was a dangerous proceeding to venture thus boldly on to the thin ice of her mother’s forbearance, but only a queer little twisted smile curled round the gimlet eyes behind the gold-rimmed spectacles.

“If I had had him——” she added, as if meditating bygone possibilities.

“Ah, well, my dear, there is something in the *chance*, I take it; and isn't there some trite saying *à propos* to the case in point?—

‘If “ifs” and “ands” were pots and pans,
There'd be no need of tinkers.’”

“Have you quite finished, mamma?” and Lady Juliana, making a fair show of composure, rose from her seat, and put her silks together, as if to depart. “I suppose there is no reason why I should not attend even-song at St. Gudulph's?” looking at her watch.

“None whatever, so long as you are back in time to dress for dinner; and don't talk ‘High Church’ during the courses as you did last week—it's monotonous, to say the least of it, and we have no right to inflict the sickly twaddle to boredom on our innocent guests.”

To this Lady Juliana made no reply, but left the room, worsted but not defeated—she felt within her a new power to resist,

and was glad to rest upon it. She had intended informing the Countess of an impending interview with her lover, but had not found the occasion promising, so concluded it must arrange itself. Thus she mused as she went to her room, and she must trust to a chapter of chance or accident. "At any rate, she was pretty sure now that her mother was prepared, and would experience" (here she laughed ironically to herself) "no shock to her nervous system on hearing of the proposed marriage."

Gwen, left alone with the Countess, was flurried and anxious. What was coming next? she wondered.

The old lady sat still in deep thought for some minutes, and Gwen did not dare follow her sister, as she would have liked to do.

The small high-heeled shoe tapped the carpet, a sure sign that the active old brain was cogitating something disagreeable. The tapping formed an accompaniment now to the one theme boiling within her, chagrin—

unsuccess. She had a wholesome scorn for the one and a horror of the other, therefore it was an absolute pain to her to see her daughters sink into old-maidenhood through, as she put it, sheer lack of *nous* or spirit.

She could never quite understand why they failed, or discover the precise moment at which half-landed fish slipped off their hook ; but, as the years rolled by, she was more and more convinced that matrimonially she must accept them as failures.

Naturally she felt this more keenly as season after season came round, which period, according to orthodox fashion, they spent in Park Lane, when milliners and dress-makers did their utmost to rejuvenate her offspring—to convert by clever brains and deft hands her mild geese into swans.

With what result ? she asked herself now. What with Gwen's idiotic revival of an old hope—for it had never been more—and Ju's religious fads, she was drifting hopelessly into a sea of insipidity. It was high time some fresh life was let in upon their dulness.

Of course, she saw clearly enough which way the wind was blowing for Ju—well, with that she had no wish to meddle; she supposed she should not have to live with the man. Personally, she had nothing to say against him, only that—and here came the rub—he, with his Ritualistic tendencies, was not man enough.

She vaguely wondered if she had not managed her children aright in their youth that things had come to this pass with them, or whether—and here she sighed—she had managed *for* them too much.

Perhaps.

Presently she turned sharply, but not unkindly, to Gwen, who was on tenter-hooks. “I suppose,” she asked, “Ju means to marry the man?”

“Yes, mamma; I believe she was going to speak to you this very afternoon, only began talking, so—so——” here the ready tears had to be sopped up again in the dainty pocket-handkerchief.

“It’ll keep; and don’t, for patience sake,

be such a soft fool, Gwen. One would think you were a chit in your teens. I fancy it's a case with Ju of liking what one gets, failing the getting of what one likes, eh?"

"I think Mr. Deraclouse very nice indeed, mamma."

"Oh, I dare say the man's *nice* enough, but fancy marrying a creature who meanders round a church in white satin and gewgaws. Ugh! Gwen, it makes me sick; but she'll do it, and, to give the devil his due, I have no feeling that the lover-like devotion is entirely for the loaves and fishes."

"I am quite sure he likes Ju immensely."

"And she?"

"Well, mamma," said Gwen, more cheerfully, "I quite believe that Ju has liked him from the very first."

"Ah! this matter of liking is a case of six the one and half-a-dozen the other, you think? Which *liking* is altogether a different thing, it seems to me, to the *loving* that held good and ruled the roast in my day."

“ Oh, mamma ! ”

“ Tut, tut ! don't be such an utter simpleton, Gwen ; and such a name as the fellow's got. For the life of me, I always think of dirty clothes.”

Poor Gwen laughed a little at this, and anxious to ward off any return to the topic of her own matrimonial non-success, asked, “ And when shall we go to Bond Street, mamma, to buy that wedding present for Madoline Trench ? ”

“ Any day will do ; I'll wait now till Mab comes, and she will suggest something useful. Now, I call that a good match for that Trench girl.” Gwen felt the ice thin under her feet, so said nothing. “ Frank Ellaby's a fine young fellow—plenty of manliness about him. Ha ! ha ! picture him or Philip Dyketon crawling round a church in white satin *vestments*, don't they call the new-fangled frippery ? ”

As she spoke, the testy old woman put her knitting aside, with an intimation “ that they might as well call on Mrs. Erskine before

going into the park, as she must tell her about Mab's coming up."

Now, Gwen would have preferred not calling on this individual, as a suspicion existed in her mind that her secret was not safe from Nora's discriminating gaze—not that she considered her young sister in the light of a successful rival. She admired Mab Ellaby, and indulged in no mean jealousy on account of her more youthful charms.

That the girl loved Philip Dyketon she felt morally certain; indeed, in Gwen's opinion, any girl not liking the object of her own hidden devotion would have been guilty of treason. Perhaps Mab, too, suffered through her love, and her pity softened down any trace of bitterness that remained. For herself, her speculations never expanded into actual hope. She would have reddened even in the solitude of her own chamber at such a practical view of the case.

Did he love Mabel Ellaby? was a question she could not help asking herself. He had been in town, virtually with them, for nearly

a month, when he might have been at Little Marsdon had he chosen, and this to her did not look like love.

She had been drifting on in an undefined happiness in his presence, and her mother's abrupt announcement of inviting Mab to visit them had struck her with dismay.

Her meek, torpid nature was stirred to its depths, and shame suffused her delicate cheeks as she tied her bonnet strings, and she thought "that, after all, she had been listening to the vain whisperings of a will-o'-the-wisp, and had been unwomanly enough to live in a false security."

But did Philip Dyketon love Mab Ellaby, after all? Her mother appeared to imagine so, and she was seldom far wrong; and would it be for the happiness of either that this thing should be?

For herself, she could see nothing in his manner of such love—of the kind of love she dimly understood such men must feel to a woman whom they would, so loving, desire to marry.

CHAPTER IV.

GOLDEN SUMMER.

It came about one broiling July day that Mab Ellaby and Di Trench heard a pitiful tale of domestic trial, sudden sickness, and possible death in Marsdon.

Poor Mrs. Snelling was ill. Pecuniary difficulties, too, were hanging over the small house in Tent Street, with its teeming inmates—a term applicable to the family of children ranging from Elsie, the eldest, to the new-born infant of a few hours.

Elsie was but fourteen, and the family numbered ten. Now, ten small hungry mouths to fill renders household bills of abnormal interest, not to say dread.

It was so in the Snellings' abode, and creditors were impatient, as creditors will be with the "honest, therefore poor and struggling man." The wife was sick and weary

the doctor at his wits' end with corroding cares.

"Poor dear little woman!" said Mab. "How perfectly awful to have a new baby under such circumstances! Possibly there is something we can do," and forthwith both girls, prompted by lively sympathy, proceeded to the scene of so much unmerited distress.

The house stood back somewhat from the street, behind a narrow garden, whose ground was parched and dry, and in which the plants were choked with an overgrowth of rank weeds and trailing tendrils.

There was about the surroundings that indescribable air of shrinking from notice, of knocking under to trouble, that dwellings assume when the clouds of adversity hang over them. A stifled hush was over everything outside; but outside only, for as the girls turned in at the garden-gate, sounds of uproar and wrangling could be distinctly heard from within.

"Bless those bairns," whispered Di,

“whatever can they be making such a row about, and that poor little soul right overhead !”

The front door was ajar, and without hesitation Mab pushed it open and entered the familiar living-room, to find high dispute over a game of “funerals” existing among the tangle of children collected there.

On the spare leaf of the dining-table lay Ramsay, a lean, sickly tyke of three and a half, duly arrayed as the officiating corpse, preparatory to the “carrying.”

A war of words as to who should be bearers was quelled on the instant by Mab’s authoritative, “*Be silent, all of you.*”

Yet she could scarcely forbear laughing at the scene—there stood Ogilvie, a boy of ten, dressed in one of Elsie’s nightgowns, some old bell-pulls doing duty for “stole”—book in hand, ready to read the Burial Service when the clamour should cease, while the rest were got up more or less grotesquely for the occasion.

“What are you dreadful children doing?”

inquired Di Trench, severely, "and your poor mother so ill."

"Playing funerals," replied the preternaturally wise Ogilvie, with a deeply disgusted expression, "and they are quarrelling over the grave worse than Hamlet and Laertes."

"You awful little sinners, what an unwholesome game to play!"

"It is the only one they will ever play," quietly said poor Ogilvie, the tears in his eyes showing so plainly that it was *his best* he had been vainly endeavouring to do.

Mab kissed him, and the lad was comforted, although he tore off his clerical habiliments with savage haste as Di, not so sharp in her perceptions as Mab, went on, "I declare you are perfect heathens, and your poor dear little mother so ill, and a new baby sister upstairs."

"We don't want her," growled Ned, a black-eyed boy of seven.

"No, that we don't," chimed in a small feminine voice with sublime inhumanity ;

“we’ve got too many now to play games prop’ly, and that’s what makes us quarrel so bad.”

Mab was obliged to smile at this small philosopher, but when poor tired Elsie came into the room, her red eyes and swollen cheeks testifying how hardly the battle was going with her, she stopped, and with moisture dimming her own eyes said, “You wonder to see us, Elsie dear, but we want to do something—anything to help you.” She saw the child was over-burdened, and her heart ached for her as she answered sadly, with quivering lips, “You are so kind,” and then broke down.

“What is the matter, darling?” asked Di, kneeling impulsively on the floor before the pitiful little sister-mother. “Tell us what we can do that will help you most.”

“Everything is the matter,” said Elsie, still more sadly, “and nurse thinks that I *can* keep all the children quiet if I like——”

“As if you could,” cried Di, hotly, “the inhuman little wretches! We’ll just take and

put them"—pausing for a suitable place to which to consign them—"into the blackhole," glancing round on the frightened faces threateningly.

"I tell you what we will do," cried the more practical Mab. "If they will be good children, we'll take them all away for a whole week. I'll take four if you'll take four, Di," as she counted the eight heads; "and I'm sure," taking Ogilvie's hand, "you will help me to mind them, won't you?"

The boy's eyes glistened, but he uttered no word.

Just then Datchet happened to pass, and she ran out to beg his assistance, rapidly telling him her scheme for removing the children.

When she returned to the house, confusion worse confounded reigned among the unruly pack, who were just beginning to understand the treat in store for them.

Elsie Snelling was completely unstrung by such blessed relief. She was only fourteen, and was tired and worn-out with the

strain of a too heavy responsibility—the trying to compass ends only to be achieved with ease by a woman whose age was her own with the figures reversed.

Mab went upstairs to interview the nurse, who, when she fairly comprehended the situation, earnestly proclaimed them “hangels o’ mussy, and no mistake, and that she’d help with a right goodwill to get sich a rampagious lot off anywhere for the time bein’.”

Preparations were in full swing when the doctor arrived, and he stared bewildered, as well he might, at the busy scene.

“I hope you won’t mind, Mr. Snelling,” said Mab, jumping up from her efforts to button some small boots, “but Di Trench and I are going to take all these children off for a week—we can both turn them loose into big gardens, to say nothing of our orchard.”

“But, my dear young ladies, what will Mrs. Ellaby and Mrs. Trench say?”

“Oh, nothing,” cried both the girls, eagerly,

as they could but see how worn-out and dejected he was. "We shall each take what trouble there may be, and Elsie is going to send on their kit," went on Mab, "and if their nightgowns don't come in time I shall whip my four into bolster-cases."

Mr. Snelling could not respond to her merry quips, but he was deeply touched by the unselfish kindness. He was weighed down by carking care, by grinding poverty, and by painful anxiety.

"Kind, womanly girls," he said afterwards to Clement Danes, who came in by appointment to see the patient, and had helped the batch off. "It may even save my poor darling's life."

"Yes, it is very good of them," rejoined Clement, as he closed the garden gate.

"How we shall miss them when they go!" meaning the Ellabys. "I am sure I hope the railway will never be finished," sighed Mr. Snelling.

Clement Danes did not second this expressed hope so readily as his less successful

fellow-practitioner expected, but he smiled as he made quick answer, "*I* do not intend to miss them to that extent : I have put in a retainer for my own benefit."

"You don't mean Miss Dorothy?"

Clement Danes nodded.

"Then you are a very fortunate man," said the surgeon, "and I congratulate you sincerely."

The above incidents account for the large assemblage in the apple orchard of Pendleton Grange at tea-time, and for the appearance of sweet, blushing Dorothy in the side path leading to the Warren, with the slim young physician's arm round her waist.

The inhabitants of the Grange had, after the bustle of the wedding, settled down into their normal calm, and the hot summer weeks went by with but little change. The dim old orchard was their chief resort during the afternoons, and tea was always served there.

Now that Frank was engaged to Madoline

Trench, she, of course, monopolised a great portion of his time ; still, he found occasion and opportunities to accompany his father and Alec on excursions to one part or another of the work, in which he took great interest, for he was storing up useful knowledge to take back with him for the benefit of his own firm.

Mrs. Ellaby, mother like, treasured every minute she enjoyed alone with her son, although she did not begrudge Maddy her larger share, for she was so thoroughly satisfied with his choice of a wife and thankful that he was not going abroad again alone and uncared for in home comforts, of which, together with other fond parents, she firmly believed all young bachelors were deprived, whereas we know that, as a rule, they take uncommonly good care of themselves, and are often the recipients of a great deal more taking care of than are some married men in a similar position.

Madoline was intensely happy. This was to her a golden summer. Frank was vir-

tually already her lord and master, and she looked to him for guidance in all things, even requiring his casting vote as to the colour of a dress or the set of a mantle, and he was often called upon to pass judgment on the contents of sundry and manifold parcels which Nora sent down from town "on approval" for the wedding trousseau.

"I believe," Di would say, "you would decide on a mustard-coloured gown and a grass-green tippet if Frank, just to get out of further bother, were to say, 'Yes, that's the thing; don't look at any more.'"

The railway porters and carriers would soon have discovered that another wedding was pending from these parcels alone, but the engagement had been openly announced at once, therefore doing away with all worrying speculation.

During the warm, drowsy days of July there was no place so delectable for the lovers as the tangled old orchard, and they were inwardly aggrieved when Mab sailed down

upon them with the four young Snellings "in tow," as Alec called it.

The Elf, too, was living at the Grange under Dorothy's supervision during Mr. Dyketon's absence in London, so it was a full house. Di Trench was often there, asserting in forcible terms "that their own house was preciously dull without Maddy to quarrel with, and that she considered it a shame that every time parcels came she should have to troop along the dusty road to fetch or consult with her." Not that she appeared to mind it much, for Alec was always ready to wile away the tedium with a game of tennis, and it only required the proverbial "half-eye" to see that Di's visits usually occurred at such times as he was at home.

A marked change was visible in Annabel Westgate. The little quaint mannerisms still clung to her, but were not so pronounced, while the slight rudeness that used to detract from her loveableness was fast disappearing under her more cheerful surroundings. She was decidedly more accessible,

perhaps more unselfish, for in a large home circle sympathies are widened in proportion as selfishness or self-interest is narrowed. The mixing with young people was telling favourably upon her, for she had undoubtedly lived too much secluded from such healthy influence, and she loved Dorothy Ellaby with a feverish, intense love, while Alec was her devoted adherent and friend. To him she turned when in any need of comfort and help. It seemed more natural to her to consult him in virtue of his sex, perhaps from always having lived with Mr. Dyketon apart, comparatively speaking, from feminine dominion. She was, in addition to her thoughtfulness as a child, becoming inquisitive on many things appertaining to maturer years, and it was to Alec she referred when any difficulty cropped up which required explanation—slight affairs that she was too shy to mention to any other, even to her dear Dorothy.

Unknown to her, it was her first experience of the subjugation of sex—her primary

perception of her power as a woman. She never doubted, for one instant, his willingness to serve her or his ability to obey her behests.

As for him, he was always good-tempered, and gave her interrogations his fullest consideration, at the same time telling her she must have been born with a "query" tacked to her back, she asked so many questions.

"But I want so to learn, Mr. Alec. Oh, I so want to know everything! It is so hard to be only a child when I so *wish* to be a woman."

"All in good time," laughed Alec.

"You encourage her, Alec—little perky, inquisitive thing," said Mab, with pettish irritability, as the child walked away.

Mab Ellaby at this time, despite her winsomeness, was still a prey to the irritability which had been so conspicuous at Nora's wedding; and it pained them all, particularly Alec, who would, at any risk, have willingly suffered in her stead. But

he was at a loss here ; he could only guess the cause of her petulance ; and then sometimes her mood was so gay, and her merry jesting so lively, as to disarm the suspicion that grief or discomfort lurked under the light surface.

And who more happy then as her constant shadow, Malcolm Trench?

That Mr. Philip Dyketon was away was certainly no drawback to his pleasure. On the contrary, he was obliged to him for staying in town this season so much longer than usual.

This protracted absence kindled a ray of hope ; for, had Philip Dyketon wished very much for Mab's society, he would not have thus voluntarily remained away.

"You are a bit unjust to the child, Mab," Alec continued. "She is anxious to know things, and is chock full of queer ideas that want sorting out ; but I should not call her exactly inquisitive."

"*Curious*, then, if you want to split straws," was Mab's tart rejoinder. "And,

besides," yawning, "it's too hot to argue. Is it anything like tea-time?"

So saying, she lay back at ease among the long grasses, only to spring up presently to call out, "Oh, Alec, do go and swing those children!" and with a return of her good-natured disposition, she added comically, "It half besorrows me that I whisked them hither. Heigho! I wonder how Di gets on with hers."

"She's going to bring them up this evening," Alec replied carelessly, with a boyish flush.

"Of course," said Mab, teasingly; "but you needn't blush, dear. Shall you drive them all home, or carry little Milly 'picky-back,' as you did last night? There's for and against to both modes of transit."

CHAPTER V.

AN EAVESDROPPER.

MAB, still resting among the grasses, saw tea approaching, and her mother carrying a handful of letters that had come by the afternoon post.

With her were Frank and Madoline, and almost simultaneously Clement Danes and Dorothy issued from the Warren. Alec and the Elf left off swinging the children, who all crowded round the preparations for a meal.

Mab sat up and surveyed the scene, stifling a dismal yawn. "How provokingly happy and ridiculously content you four look! beatific isn't the word for it. You are worse than Nora and Tom—a second edition of them, aggravated by two; and if, girls, you could only see your heads!"

Madoline and Dorothy instinctively put up

white hands to smooth their ruffled locks, at which there was a general laugh.

"That's a case of pot and kettle," remarked Frank. "Your own is not so very tidy."

"Only the bole of this stubborn, knobbly old tree is responsible for that. Any letters for me, mother?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Ellaby; "there was one, dear; where is it now? Oh, I gave it to Malcolm; he will be here in a minute."

Mab, expecting no letter in particular, was not anxious; yet when Malcolm Trench gave her one bearing a coronet on the seal, she cried out excitedly, "Fancy! one from the Countess."

No one but Malcolm heard her exclamation: Mrs. Ellaby was busy with tea, while the lovers were again absorbed in themselves.

"For what can she be writing, Mab?" he inquired, with interest.

Mab made no answer, but, utterly regardless of his presence, gave vent to her excitement by calling out, "The dear old thing!

Listen, all of you. She invites me to come to stay at Park Lane for a fortnight—says I am not to trouble about clothes or anything, but to come at once, and get what I want there. The ball is in four days' time. Oh, mother, say I can go ! ”

A growl emanated from Malcolm's lips that sounded like “ Park Lane be blowed ! ” but beyond that he said nothing to swell the chorus that arose at Mab's unexpected news.

“ Say I can go, dear,” she appealed to her mother, with eager eyes.

“ I dare say, darling, only don't pinch a piece out of my arm.”

“ But, then, how can I ”—her face suddenly changing—“ with all these children here. Of course, I brought them, and——”

“ I will take them in hand,” said Dorothy, promptly, “ and Annabel will help me, I know, and Ogilvie is so good.”

Malcolm Trench's spirits fell rapidly, and to hide his discomfiture he betook himself to the tea-table, where, in tendering the cream-jug to Mrs. Ellaby, the thing viciously

toppled over, emptying its contents into a new tennis felt which Mab had embroidered for him only two days ago.

“The brute!” he muttered savagely, exasperated by her glee and his own clumsiness. “Why,” he thought furiously, “should Mab be so delighted at the prospect of leaving them to go among strangers—to a scene, too, whither he could by no possibility follow?”

I am of opinion that he roundly anathematised the Countess for her unsolicited kindness, and, to intensify his misery, came the suggestion that she would meet Philip Dyketon. Ah! now he could account for her excitement—her pitiful eagerness to go; and she had been so kind and tolerant to him of late, had not snapped or snarled at him, had even appeared to like to have him near her.

He saw now to what extent his hopes had grown; but hope is a gourd that springs up quickly, and alas! like one, can be cut down with a single blow.

Is “Hope” a liar? as Carlyle has it. At

least, she is an agreeable one, and the truth is not always.

Fools' paradise has its primrose path, in which it is perilously sweet to linger. Who likes to be turned out of such a paradise by the flaming sword of "awakening"?

"Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise." Certainly Malcolm Trench did not wish for, or welcome, this rude awaking, this cold douche of wisdom gained from experience.

As he mopped up the cream from the tennis cap he resentfully resolved to loathe the very sight of that delicacy to his dying day. Nevertheless, with the contrariness of human nature, he found the tea extremely washy without it. Heartache does not always effectually stifle bodily necessities, and the maxillary glands do not cease their functions because the spirit is sick with the fruitlessness of exhausting effort.

Love-sickness, too, is a disease which elicits little or no consideration : one labouring under a sharp attack is almost as great

a nuisance to his immediate circle as a sufferer from toothache or tic-doloureux. Nobody paid the slightest heed to poor Malcolm's misery, save Maddy, who slipped her hand into his, whispering kindly, "Never mind, dear old boy, a fortnight will soon pass away."

"I wish," said Mab, glancing at Dorothy, "she had asked you as well. I don't, somehow, fancy the girls will care overmuch to have me; they like you ever so much better. She doesn't," referring to her letter, "say a word about them."

"The *girls*!" ejaculated Malcolm Trench, with a fine sarcastic emphasis on the noun plural, by way of letting off a little of his superfluous spleen.

"Don't be rude, Mr. Trench," was all this remark called forth, and Mab's eyes flashed ominously as she said it; so that the misery fit came on again with renewed violence, and a *relapse* in most ailments is far more serious than the original attack. Maddy, angry with her friend and grieved

for her brother, could only squeeze his hand furtively.

“Mr. Trench” fell on his ears like cold steel. For the last week or two she had dropped quite naturally into calling him “Malcolm.” So much good had his sneering remark cost him, that he could only retire into patient or impatient sullenness.

It was hard that all of them should unite in the laugh against the harassed sufferer except the faithful Madoline. Even the young Snellings broke into vacuous grins. But probably they missed the true point of the situation, and were more moved by the piled-up plates of sweet cake that the maids were placing on the improvised table.

An equally intense amusement and as keen an appreciation of the situation were on another face—on that of a man who was not one of their party, but a complete stranger, and one whose nearness to them was altogether unsuspected.

This personage was snugly ensconced in an old disused summer-house—disused, at

least, during the heat of the day, when the outside air was preferable to its earwiggy stuffiness.

The man had evidently been asleep on the broad seat ; but he was wide awake now, and could see quite easily and distinctly hear the conversation of this group near him.

“Who the dickens are they?” he wondered. “It can hardly be a picnic party, or is the ramshackle old place inhabited? I know the neighbourhood fairly well, but can’t recognise any of the faces, except the Trench lot, in whom it don’t want spectacles to trace a likeness to their father, old Square-toes. Certainly it is some years since I was last here ; but who the devil can these people be with whom the Trenches are so familiar? And who is that scrumptious little beauty who has ‘sat upon’ the young lawyer in such a quenching way by her ‘Don’t be rude, Mr. Trench’? By Jove! it is some time since I have been so fetched by a girl.”

Before, when hard up, he had turned a five-pound note by a highly seasoned story

in the "penny novelette line," and he determined that this animated scene should open another when he was near "broke" again.

"And, come to that, I ain't far off it now. I have only to write up this spanking little beauty, and stick in a few dukes and duchesses, and the thing would 'go' like smoke."

He summed the party up in its entirety pretty correctly: The two sets of lovers; the girls pretty enough, but uninteresting; the men tolerable, save that the lean one was a bit of a prig, and had a voice like the snapping of wire; the handsome mother; the eager children, strangers apparently, and "deucid hungry;" the beauty, and the would-be lover.

"Be careful, my dear," Mrs. Ellaby called out, causing the intruder to look carelessly at first, but with increasing curiosity, in another direction, whence the Elf appeared, carrying a huge jug of milk.

"This is becoming exciting. Who the very

—— can this child—or is it *woman*—be, with those eyes, with that rare voice? Am I dreaming? *Good God!* Or is the old heathen living again in another phase of existence? What was it the Rosicrucians advanced respecting this theory? Bah! I am mad,” and the fellow—a handsome one, too, of a sort—almost laughed aloud.

Annabel Westgate, having set down her heavy load, stood erect and drew up her figure with a very graceful movement for such a young girl

“His very trick,” muttered the unseen on-looker, gazing earnestly at her. “But is she child, girl, or woman? *Child*,” he concluded, noting her undeveloped figure.

“The makings of a fine woman, a regular high-stepper, there,” he muttered on. “By jingo! give her another five years, little wear and no tear, and she’ll give all the rest of this kit the go-by.”

He half sat up, never taking his bold eyes off Annabel. “What a —— air for such a chit to possess, and what eyes! The deuce

take it, she'll learn their use soon enough, worse luck. But *what* a look of ——!"

Here the clean-shaven face was wiped by a handkerchief that had done some service since its last washing.

Why should the beads of perspiration start so on the broad forehead, and the gaze of the blue eyes contract as with fear and then fill with unshed moisture?

"Bah! I have not shed a tear during my thirty odd years of existence, and I never was fond of, or even dutiful to the old reprobate. Phew," he murmured, "how close this den is! What the devil am I thinking of? And all for a cursed resemblance that, as often as not, is a mere chance—— And yet he might be here in the very flesh, or this child-woman might be the siren spirit of the dead-and-gone Kirkburns. Ah! good idea, that, for my next penny-a-liner. The siren spirit of a rather old race embodied in an elfish creature, half child, three-parts woman, for those eyes count double."

At this point Annabel passed beyond his

range of vision, and his ruminations terminated in a long-drawn sigh. He was thankful she no longer stood in front of him, for she had stirred up old memories—dark, unwholesome memories of a joyless boyhood, when the glance of just such eyes, the sound of just such a voice, had searched out his soul and read his hidden thoughts.

In those days he had had so many hidden thoughts, unboylike and un-Christian. He had been a boy without a boy's heart; his youth had been cumbered with the half-understood wickednesses of a corrupt old age thrust upon him too early in life, when the blight of an old man's sensual decay had withered the growth of all true manhood in him.

He wished he could get out of this stuffy old arbour, but that was impossible without all these people seeing him, and just then Mrs. Ellaby spoke again, re-arresting his attention.

"It will be nice for you, Mab darling, as Mr. Dyketon is in town."

"The deuce he is," soliloquised the

stranger. "And so the little beauty's name is Mab, and what other would have suited her half so well? How she blushes!" (Mab was removing one of the children's sticky palms from her lap.) "So ho! that's the way the wind blows. Bad for you, Mr. Trench."

Once more the Elf came into view, and looked at Mab with a jealous glance, not lost upon the quick-sighted watcher behind the arbour tracery.

"Ha! ha! ha!" he laughed softly, "the plot thickens; only wants working up to be positively thrilling. So the little one's in the swim, and the fair Mab is not sure of her game. You may pluck up courage, young bluebag, it's a big stake; but give old sobersides time to decide: I'll back the young one to win. Hang it all! given that one type of eye, and a woman can play what game she likes, be she sixteen or sixty."

"I don't know, mother dear, if, after all, I shall go," said Mab, with a touch of irritation.

“Ha! *not* sure of her hand,” was the eaves-dropper’s running commentary. “Thought as much—one don’t study character parts for nothing—but *she’ll go*. She’s a young filly, and handicapped by inexperience; but she’s got the right stuff in her to ‘stay,’ and if she don’t win the race she’ll never say die. She’s wound up to a pretty high pitch, though, just now, and she won’t shirk her fences; but—there’ll be a burst of emotion soon. By Jove! on the stage ’twould bring down the house. I wish they’d all depart and leave me to decamp in peace, or to smoke a cigar on the quiet, while I plan out my plot—that story will have to be written,” jingling some loose coin in his pocket, “for the Oaks have about sewed you up, old boy.”

If they had heard the wish they could not have more quickly gratified it: with almost one accord a general move was made house-wards.

All went but Mab: even Malcolm, receiving no sign to stay, reluctantly left her alone with the deserted tea equipage. And

she? Swiftly and hurriedly she dashed into the old summer-house and flung herself down on what she mistook for an empty seat, to burst into wild and uncontrollable weeping.

“Gently, young lady. I don’t, as a rule, mind being sat upon, to almost any extent, by your charming sex, but when nine stone—and I guess you weigh fully that—plump themselves suddenly on one’s breathing apparatus, it’s—well, it’s a motion open to amendment.”

CHAPTER VI.

MR. CECIL GERAINT.

To say that Mab was astonished would be a statement inadequate to express her horror and disgust at the position in which she found herself. For the man in rising did not attempt to release his hold of her supple waist ; indeed, he retained it firmly whilst he told her, in a chaffing way, " that she need not struggle and be a little fool, for that there were many worse things in life than a *tête-à-tête* in a summer-house on a scorching July day."

Mab's tears dried on the instant, and her hot spirit was immediately up in arms to throw off such cavalier treatment. " Be so good as to unhand me, sir, and then I will speak to you."

The thorough command she possessed over herself produced the desired effect :

such insolence could not live under the scathing contempt of her tone. She was free on the instant to move from him, and to place herself opposite to him on the other side of the small wooden table. She made no childish rush to assume the situation, nor gave way to weak protestations of maidenly alarm, as many less brave girls might have done. Her courage and dignity rose, and she showed no fear whatever as she looked the man full in the face.

“Plucky, by Jove!” he owned, as he met the clear eyes with bold but respectful admiration.

“I was not aware,” said Mab, slowly, “that our old arbour had an occupant.”

“No,” he answered, slightly disconcerted by her calmness. “I ought, and do, most humbly apologise for having taken such a liberty as to rest in it until sleep overcame me. When I awoke and heard voices, it was impossible for me to come forth and confess myself such an unwarrantable trespasser.”

“Not at all ; it is precisely what a *gentle man* would at once have done.”

His face darkened at this rebuke, which he appeared inclined to punish, but forebore, merely bowing and smiling—a smile, however, that Mab by no means liked ; for, although not in the least impertinent, it was too inscrutable to justify her in challenging it. “And, after all,” thought she, with rather a misgiving, “the man is a gentleman.”

“Perhaps you are right, Miss——” Here he hesitated, whereupon she said simply, “My name is Ellaby, sir.”

He was in the act, as she spoke, of taking his handkerchief from his coat pocket, which he hastily raised, thereby almost hiding his face from her.

When he removed the handkerchief much of the audacity, which was the chief characteristic of his countenance, had vanished, he could no longer return her steady gaze. He was pale and uneasy, his lips were parched, and for a second he seemed deprived of utterance.

"You are ill," exclaimed Mab, noticing his involuntary distress.

"I believe I am. I suppose I have been lying in this close place till I am a trifle faint."

Mab, generally impulsive, promptly offered to bring him some tea. "I do not think it is quite cold," she said, "and it is sufficiently strong to revive you."

"Thank you very much, Miss——"

"Ellaby," she said again, bowing, and smiling a little.

"Ah, yes," returning the bow. "I shall be really grateful to you, but first permit me," and he produced a card from his pocket-case, which he handed to her.

"Thank you," glancing at it courteously, to read thereon, in clear characters—

"MR. CECIL GERAIN'T,
Grand Theatre, ——."

"You are an actor?" she said, not so much from a wish to gain information as to cover an otherwise awkward pause while she poured out the tea, which, with a cup and

saucer and some biscuits, she had fetched into the arbour.

“And playwright,” he replied, adding, with a slight sneer, “Do you despise the profession?”

“By no means,” with ready politeness; “I am far too ignorant to do such a thing. To me it is a wonderful, charming, ever-changing existence, which must be delightful, though”—rather putting a check on herself—“I absolutely know nothing of it, and have only been once inside a theatre in my life.”

“Really, is that so?” as if astonished.

“Indeed, it is true,” she said, smiling again, “although to you it may appear strange; but we always live in country places, and I never care to see second-rate performances.”

“You are about right there,” he said thoughtfully, and drinking his tea with great relish. “But it is those people who know nothing of it, Miss—Ellaby” (the name came from his lips with difficulty), “who are usually so confoundedly down on it.”

The latent vulgarity of this speech repelled the girl, and she made no comment.

"I will not detain you, young lady," he said next, having finished the one cup and declining a second, "for I have clearly no right to do so ; but I shall always remember your graceful kindness, and," with hesitation, for her changed behaviour was not lost on him, "if it is not too great a liberty, I should like to say how sorry I am that you should be in so great trouble as to cause you to shed such tears." He saw by the haughty rise of the small head that it would be considered an impertinence, and deftly continued, "I did not know, when I took refuge in this old receptacle, that Pendleton Grange was inhabited. I suppose I thought because it had lain empty so long, that it would always do so."

"We have lived here nearly two years," said Mab. "I believe it had been unoccupied for a long time."

"Oh, yes," with a shrug of his shoulders that spoke volumes.

“You know it,” cried Mab, hastily, and then was vexed with herself for her inadvertent remark. “What does it signify to me,” she thought, “whether such a man knows the place or not?”

He took advantage of her indiscretion to prolong the conversation, although he read what was passing in her mind with perfect ease.

“I do, and I do not,” he answered with well-acted indifference—“business sometimes calls me in this direction. I know it by repute—who does not?—and I may also say by sight, though it’s tolerably well screened from the road.”

“Yes,” said Mab, laconically, wondering within herself what the opinion would be indoors if they could know she was entertaining an unknown actor out in the orchard. The idea struck her as rather ludicrous, and the stranger seemed to catch the smile that rose to her eyes and to transvert it to purposes of his own, for he asked indolently, “Would you mind telling me who that young

lady is with the marvellous eyes and short brown hair—is she a sister of yours ? ”

There certainly was a peculiarly fascinating power about the man which disarmed anger ; besides, his manner was now quiet and deferential. Said Mab—

“ Oh dear, no ; it is Annabel Westgate, of Marsdon House.”

“ But—I thought that was a bachelor establishment ? ” He spoke carelessly, but watching her closely the while.

“ It is,” she rejoined stiffly : “ the child is his ward.”

“ His ward ! ” And here Mr. Geraint laughed immoderately. “ This is too consumedly funny. Since when has Philip Dyketon set up such an anomalous appendage as a ward ? ” he asked.

Once more Mabel Ellaby was irritated by the man’s insolence, and she made answer with studied coldness, “ I am not prepared, sir, to discuss Mr. Dyketon’s private affairs with a—*stranger*.” She laid a marked emphasis on the last word, which, however,

only elicited an approving look from her tormentor.

“You are right again, Miss Ellaby,” he resumed, with becoming gravity, his almost mesmeric influence again throwing her off her guard. “Perhaps, young lady, you have never been suddenly oppressed by the conviction that you have known a person intimately, yet one whom you are assuredly well aware you are seeing for the first time.”

“No,” said Mab, keenly interested in spite of herself, “I cannot say that I have, though I have read of such instances.”

He looked out through the open door of the summer-house, across the Warren, and his clear-cut profile showed to advantage under Mab’s scrutiny. “He is very handsome,” she concluded, “but——” Here her ruminations were cut short by his explaining, “I experienced something of this on seeing that child; she strongly and unpleasantly attracted me.”

“Yes,” said Mab, in a tone inviting further speech; but he did not appear to hear her, or

forgot that he was not alone, as he softly whistled to himself the refrain of an old ballad. Then recollecting himself, he bade her a hasty adieu with the unmistakable air of a man of the world. He sauntered leisurely away in the direction of Nincleton, crossing the road towards a private entrance leading to the Warren.

“He must know the place well,” said Mab, watching his retreating figure with some curiosity.

As he turned in at the gate, perceiving her still standing where he had left her, he lifted his hat with a bold, daring gallantry that brought a hot flush to her brow, and caused her to move haughtily away.

“How dare he?” she said to herself, angrily.

But Cecil Geraint, amused, only laughed merrily as he disappeared from sight. “Pretty little dear! was it angry, then?” he chuckled to himself. “By Jove! Cecil, my boy, that was a close shave: you’ve just come well out of it.”

But his merriment seemed to die a sudden death, and frowns gathered round the bold eyes. Some distance he walked on moodily, lost in reflection, out of which he roused himself in time to remember he wanted to catch a train in Ninleton for town. "Pooh!" he muttered, pacing the platform, "thoughts, the very devil! it's enough to give one the 'hump' to dwell on old scrapes at this rate; but, Cecil, my boy, take the advice of your best friend, and let sleeping dogs lie, or, as the French have it, 'Wake not the sleeping cat,' if the sound of a name can knock your teeth down your throat in this fashion. *Ellaby—Ellaby!* so that's baby Mab, then. Cecil, old man, what you want is a good stiff 'peg' to set you off on the old easy track again, unless you intend to conjugate the verb 'to funk.'"

Mab did not go indoors after the actor left her, but indulged in a musing fit, of which he was the beginning, middle, and conclusion.

She had never been in the company of

such a man before. To her limited experience he was an anomaly, and one very hard to understand, and this very fact made her restless and vaguely uneasy. "Perhaps," she concluded, "his profession may account in some measure. How good-looking he is, too!—no, that he is *not*, but handsome—yes, and bold, and daring." "Bohemian" was not a term which occurred to Mab's unversed mind to use, but which would have comprised all to a more worldly-wise girl, so she speculated on in her simple fashion, unaided by such equivocal wisdom. How well she could fancy him acting a part on a stage! The only play she had ever seen was "David Garrick." She could imagine this man playing the *rôle* of David, and she trembled as she pictured his great scene in it. "But," came the question, "could *he* ever *suffer* as poor David did?" The answer came promptly, "No." If he chose, he could make anybody like him—any woman, at least—even against her own sense of reason, and then he would as certainly be careless

and cruel, perhaps cold and sarcastic, certainly selfish.

It was a hard face when the thin veil of fascination was withdrawn. The word "sensual" failed Mab; though, simple as she was, and ignorant of the darker side of corrupt human nature, she read it fairly aright, for the true instinct of a pure woman is never at fault.

She little knew as she thus summed up this chance wayfarer's character, that the strands of circumstance in both their lives had crossed and intermingled, and would so alter the tenour of both, that never again should either be precisely as he or she had been before.

CHAPTER VII.

A NAVVY DEPUTATION.

THE generality of people hold very confused notions *as to what a navvy is*. Neither is it here that one can enter into lengthened discussion upon the question, nor afford space to weigh the *pros* and *cons* in his favour or disfavour as a *man and a brother*.

The term "navvy," as the Rev. Mr. Barrett aptly puts it in his "Work among the Navvies," is an abbreviation of "navigator," which term, by-the-bye, has a most unpleasant suggestion of rhyming with "alligator." There are some people so ignorant as to be unwilling to concede to the class any redeeming points, of which it possesses plenty, and who deem the navvy a specimen of anthropophagus, whose province it is to go about in ferocious, ill-conditioned hordes, to frighten decent people into fits. Not so.

“Not,” to quote George Tempest, “by no manner o’ means.”

There are “blacks” among them—this being their term for scoundrels—but there are also true men, with honest, good-intentioned, kindly natures ; men—ay, and women too—who will shrink from no hardship, nor even danger to compass a given end ; men who would deny themselves “their full quart”—a veritable self-denial on their part—to give their penny or their sixpence to the “collection” in case of need or suffering among their fellows. Many thank-offerings in the form of a good round sum have been received by county hospitals and infirmaries, formed entirely—all honour to them—by the grateful and willing contributions of the men’s pennies alone, and such money must carry its blessing with it.

And the kindly deeds, the self-sacrificing acts, to say nothing of the unselfish personal devotion that navvies will perform, if one only gets the right knack of dealing with their rough natures—if one, so to speak, will

but stroke them the right way. Then, and then only, you will come across the pure vein of gold, and will find them much as other men.

Don't let the mud-encrusted jack-boots with the heavy hobnails, the pea-jacket with its buttons like small tea-plates, or the gaudy neck-scarf prejudice you against the free-hearted fellow who trolls his snatch of song as he fearlessly tramps his way through life. They, in their turn, despise the dirty, unkempt, "sломicky" get-up, as they call it, of the town labourer or mechanic, keeping tenaciously to the recognised "gear" of their craft, and glorying in it. The greatest slight a shopkeeper can put on a true, well-seasoned navvy is to try and foist on him "gear alongside his own rig." "Buy that sломicky set-out? Not he." And, after all, what a picturesque garb it is ! or else why do so many fine gentlemen adopt it for fancy dress? It is only handsome, well-made men who dare show forth in it, for it is not every town dandy who can appear to

advantage in the coarse ribbed stockings and knee-breeches, or wear the open-necked shirt and loose knotted wrap with impunity.

Look into the dauntless eye of the tough old navvy whose hard manual toil is well-nigh over, or in that of the rollicking devil-may-care who is just "settling into his collar," and if you are half the man either of them is, you will put aside all sickly sentimentality pretty quickly. Neither need you fear to yield your soft and dainty palm to the friendly grasp of the horny paw held out to you. I am a woman, and my hand is as soft as most, but none the worse yet for many such a shake.

They, too, have their prejudices, coupled with a keen sense of the ridiculous, and a power of smart repartee in which there often is a touch of pathos. For instance, a woman once met a navvy in a lonely lane, and was so terrified she put herself vastly about to get out of his way. "Don't be afeard, missus; my mother was a woman." The poor scared

creature must have felt rather a fool on being thus rebuked.

Ask the navy parson—any one of the noble-hearted men who have bravely laboured among them—and I think he will admit that though there is ample proof of tares among the wheat, yet that foul words and oaths do not find vent only among navvies.

As a rule, the class holds a member of what they, with perfect good nature, facetiously call “the billycock gang,” in deep respect—that is, if that special member has any manly grit in him. And if he has not? Well, he had better not attempt such work, for he has lamentably missed his vocation.

“I guess, now,” to quote literally an old navy’s speech, “they *Johnny Randles* be shinin’ lights; leastways, our parson be. I guess they digs as deep wi’ their *Lord Lovels* as we do wi’ ours.”

For the benefit of the uninitiated in navy parlance, “Johnny Randle” stands for candle, while a shovel is dignified by the title of

“Lord Lovel,” and is also called “the navy’s prayer-book.”

As Mab Ellaby stood so long by the harbour in the orchard, Malcolm Trench watched her from no great distance, at a loss to know who the man could be to whom she had granted so clandestine an interview.

This dreadful thought entered his mind with sickening force, and seized the reins of his understanding as with grapnel-irons.

“Would she, his peerless, open-hearted little love, lower her merry dignity so far as to yield favour, and such favour, to a lover evidently unknown to her family?”

Jealous irritation held high revel in his entire being—it was maddening. Base ideas rushing in now must have place till his better nature can re-assert itself.

“Yes, she is watching him away, and leans so long against that old tree; it must be a lover she has parted with so.” His head racked with pain, and his true heart contracted with agony; his former misery was.

nothing to this sharp awakening of distrust, of anguish, of shame.

He had thought her so high-minded, so honourable. Why, when we are most miserable, do such ideas come, with flashes of conviction that strike the very soul as with a divine and uncontrovertible truth? when in reality they often are damnable lies—pure suggestions of the Evil One, made in the momentary triumph which he obtains at this point of our weakness.

Such came to Malcolm Trench. “One daughter of this family had done so—why not another?”

But the wretched thing did not long obtain on his reason and absolute fealty, for he struggled against it as sacrilege to the woman he knew he must always love to his life’s end.

It was too treacherous to sweet Mab Ellaby, too insulting to his perfect faith in her truth and goodness; so he shook himself free from the foul thought as he would have thrust a viper from his wrist.

As the years roll on, however much Mabel Ellaby may falter, or may shake the confidence of others, she will never lose the implicit trust of this one man. It will remain staunch and unassailable, telling much for the strength and purity of his love. And, men and women of this hurrying nineteenth century, there are some such loves still.

While she stood by the tree, her father called her sharply, "Mab! kitten! come and help me out of a difficulty."

She had noticed a number of their men passing a side road, dressed for some occasion other than their daily work, and on joining her father, found them assembled on the drying-ground by the kitchen garden.

"Here, Mab," said Mr. Ellaby, drawing her into their midst, "here's a job more in your line than mine, I fancy."

Something pleasant she saw by the comical look in his twinkling eyes, and by the eager faces of the men.

"What, dad?" she asked expectantly.

"Well," he replied funnily, "it's a deputation."

"A what?" cried she, laughing heartily because the men seemed to find it a relief to laugh at the master's joke.

"They are mostly old friends of yours, child, so you must tackle it for me."

With that he departed briskly into the back-door, leaving Mab with the knot of men, who clustered round her, as if glad to have only her to consult, for they were a bit sheepish about their errand before the "boss."

"And now, missy," spoke up a burly fellow, well known to Mab, by nickname "The Gunner."

But as he hesitated, he was pushed aside by a sandy-haired little man, with sparkling eyes, which gained him the pseudonym of "Ferret," who said, "It's summat as we wants done for us, Miss Mabbel, or, more c'rectly speakin', summat as we wants to do for you—leastwise, for one of yer fambly," looking round on his colleagues for approbation.

"Shove it on," called out a gruff voice from the outside ring, while another echoed, as if to a horse, "Git along."

"We've come—me and my mates—as a de-putation, then, to know as ef Master Frank'll do us the favour o' acceptin' a weddin' present from the chaps along the line?" wiping his brow with a gaily-spotted handkerchief.

Mab's face flushed with delight, and she clapped her hands gleefully. "Of *course* he will," she said, beaming warm smiles upon the group. "I should think so, indeed, and he will be honoured, as I am by your kindness."

"No offence, missy," murmured a man with a shy face and a wooden leg, who had not yet spoken; "we didn't want to take no ondoo liberties."

"I am simply *delighted*, and so will he be," averred Mab, with emphasis.

"Well, then," said George Tempest, stepping forward, "these men," waving his hand, "all our chief gangers, is, I believe,

speaking for every man-jack along the line, 'cept a few," looking at "The Gunner," "who ain't o' no manner o' count."

"Right there," mumbled "The Gunner," at which the others sniggered with suppressed eagerness.

"'Tis a universal desire as has sprung up spontaneous to do this thing ; and now, my men," turning to them so that his left eye fixed the whole company, while his right one focussed the scullery window, "I have a suggestion to make."

"Trundle it on, Spider," came from a chorus of encouraging voices.

"It is this," impressively—"that we asks Miss Mab here to de-cide *what the present shall be*, or you'll never agree, as I sees it ; besides, it stands to reason as how she'll know best as to what he'd like, likewise what 'ud be most con-venient and useful-like for 'im to tek abroad to furrin parts."

"Oh, no, no, Tempest," cried Mab. "I am sure, quite sure, he will like their own choice best."

"Ay," said he, scratching his head; "but they all hits on different things, you see, there's the worrit on't."

"Well, Miss Mabbel," spoke up "The Gunner," coming to the front again, "I ses a *clock*."

"And I ses," a voice broke in scornfully, "that of all tarnal noosances to pack up for a sea voyage, a girt big clock, like we should, o' coorse, buy—for I ain't for no mean, trumpery thing as ain't worth lookin' at—is jest the very darnedest aggravatin' crittur you could 'a' hit on."

A wiry little dark man, who had hitherto been silent, apparently lost in contemplation of Mab's beauty, remarked here, "Of course, 'tis but natural, missy, as the Spider ses, you should know far and agen the best, on'y we don't want it to leak out jest what we fixes on."

"Of course not," assented Mab, cordially. "Why, it would spoil the whole thing."

At this there arose a murmur of admiration, and the group closed in round her, till

her slight figure was lost among so many stalwart forms.

"I sees, Miss Mabbel, you strikes our meaning ex-zactly, so here goes, and chance it. Shall it be a clock, or a tay-pot (silver, mind), a Bible (a good-sized 'un), or a set o' chaney ornaments?"

"They be warments to pack, 's bad as the clock any day o' the week; nary a pin to choose atwixt the two."

A deep silence, save for stertorous breathing, ensued; but Mab broke it a little timidly by saying, "*I could* tell you—a thing—he very much wants, and would like."

"Shove it on, then, missy," at which a loud "H-s-s-s" buzzed around; but Mab laughed brightly and continued—

"He really wants—a travelling bag." She expected an ecstatic acceptance of her suggestion, but instead, the men looked at each other dubiously, so that she hastened to add, "Only that he would really and truly *prefer* a present you chose of your own accord."

“ ’Tain’t that, missy ; you’re a bit off the scent, like. You see, we means to give Master Frank suthin’ wuth lookin’ at, and I guess,” looking round inquiringly at his mates, “ a mangy little travelling bag ain’t up to much.”

“ Naw,” came to Mab’s ears, “ naw, ’tain’t.”

“ But I don’t mean a mangy little travelling bag,” she explained, understanding the case at once. “ I mean,” opening her eyes wide, and spreading out her white hands, “ a delightful, charming bag—*large*, of bullock hide, and fitted with bottles, and brushes, and combs—oh ! and all sorts of things.”

“ Ay, that’s a cat o’ a different colour. We wants to come out handsome, ef we do’s the thing at all ; we don’t want no mean cuss o’ a present, after making all this ’ere talk over it, as’ll stan’ us in on’y the matter o’ a pound or two.”

“ Naw, coorse we don’t, naw.”

“ But,” said Mab, lapsing into business-like seriousness, “ you are *not* to let it run to any great amount. If I have anything to do

with it I shall insist on only a certain sum being given by each man, and not one single man shall be *asked* for that."

"Right you be, missy. That's fair, and the prin'c'pal o' what you ses is right, look-in' at it from all p'int's o' the compass like, and here's my fist on that much."

Mab put her soft little palm into the one held out, and there was not one there who did not eagerly share the condescension of the master's pretty daughter.

"Dang you! ef ever you do's a mean, dirty action agin arter this 'ere," said one old fellow, apostrophising his right hand, as if to see if it was in any way altered by the contact—"why, I'll jest let you know you've a-put yer fut into a wa'ps' nest, and no mistake."

"And now, young leddy, a bag it's to be, then," looking round to learn the general opinion, which was announced by a series of "Ay, ay's," "and you must keep that pretty mouth o' yours shet, for secrets like this 'ere be like cats, mortal difficult to keep in bags."

Mab made solemn protestations that "indeed they might trust her," and George Tempest next asked—

"Now, how is it best to pro-cure the article? I for one ain't a-going to trust to simply orderin' it from Lon'on or Brum-magin swells, however big their shops may be."

Mab looked grave. "Stop," she cried, "let me put on my considering cap. Why, I am going to London myself to-morrow or the next day."

"Then you'll git it for us," decided half-a-dozen gruff voices, with intense relief.

"If you really would care for me to do so," and Mab glanced particularly at Tempest.

"Course we would," echoed the chorus again, and so it was settled, and when purchased it was to be sent in absolute secrecy to George Tempest's house.

"And now, savin' your presence, missy," observed the old man who had apostrophised his hand, "here's your good health"—for

beer had been sent out from the house—
“and a good, strappin’ husband to ’ee, I ses ;
and don’t you go for to have he, nayther,
nobbut he’s so handsome as a pink, and wi’ a
fist as can knock any man down and flatten
’im out as flouts ye.”

“No, I won’t,” answered Mab, merrily,
“and thank you all very much.”

With that she went indoors with a pleased
light in her face, to find her father had been
told of her invitation to town, and had given
his consent for her to go on the morrow, so
that she might have time to get her ball-
dress made.

On her being assailed with questions re-
specting the deputation, he skilfully warded
off the attack, and so left her in peace.

“Wherefore so dull, O knight of the rue-
ful countenance?” she inquired, with pro-
voking mockery, of Malcolm Trench, some
time later, on discovering him alone in the
hall.

“Why do you make me so wretched,
Mab?”

"I make you wretched?" she asked, with amazing innocence.

"Shall you go to London, Mab?"

"Of course—rather," with a short, abrupt laugh.

She was a trifle bored by his persistence, and, moreover, was tired and excited by her recent interviews. As she looked into his gloomy countenance, she defiantly thought how ridiculous it was of fellows to be so dumpy and miserable. "Have you anything to say against my going, pray?" she asked haughtily.

"Nothing whatever. Good-bye," he replied, stung by her light tone and mocking air.

Poor Malcolm walked home in the moonlight depressed, and half-repentant of his rudeness—for so he considered it—and would not have believed it, had any one told him, that Mabel Ellaby was lying on her white bed, sobbing bitterly for some reason or other which, had worlds been offered her, she could not have explained further than that "she was tired."

CHAPTER VIII.

OPPOSITE VIEWS.

“How strange I shall be in a London ball-room,” said Mab to her own image reflected in a big cheval glass, as she adjusted her simple dress. “There is sure to be a lot of swagger girls here who will take all the shine out of poor me. Well, at all events, they can’t say I have put up for much—I have steered clear of that accusation.”

“I beg your pardon, miss.”

“Oh, Brooks, is that you?” to the Countess’s rather formidable maid, who came to assist her. “How shall I do?” she asked, turning round on her toes as a pivot. “It’s very simple and neat, isn’t it?”

“Yes, miss,” looking at her critically, “it is, very—yet——”

“Yet what?” questioned Mab, slightly alarmed.

"Well, miss, it is as simple as simple can be. I don't exactly know what I mean, but I fancy it will make its mark downstairs just because of its intense plainness."

By the expression of her countenance she might have thought that Mab had some daring design in ordering and wearing such a dress, but was disarmed by the girl's sweetness and absolute frankness, as she answered, "I don't know about that, Brooks. It is a dress suitable to my position, and within my means, and not calculated to attract special notice beyond its freshness and simplicity. Of course, I want to look nice."

"You look nice enough, Miss Ellaby," said the shrewd waiting-woman, smiling.

"You see, I have never been in a London ball-room before."

"Haven't you, really, miss? Well, I expect you will find it much like others, so far as I can judge, except so fearfully crowded that nobody can dance in comfort."

"Oh, Brooks!" with a disappointed expression, "I thought I was in for a regular

good dance," and she waltzed a few steps, still looking at her reflection. "Luckily, I can turn in a small space, I don't require half the side of a room for my gyrations, unless my partner insists on it for his own sake. Then, of course, the weaker gives in."

Mrs. Brooks laughed. "You will be a success to-night, Miss Ellaby," she said, "and the Countess will be in a good temper, you'll see."

"Mrs. Brooks," said Mab, "are you not flattering me? A *success* with my poor little muslin dress and no jewels!"

"Lor, miss, why, London men see jewels till they are fair sick of them, I should say, for all sorts of people"—with a decided sniff—"wear them nowadays, and you've got the rare enough art—the very greatest art a woman can have, miss—of putting on everything so that it strikes, and I ought to know, since I've been a maid in good families for thirty years."

"Strikes! Strikes what, you funny woman?"

"The mark, miss," buttoning up her prim

mouth. "The gift of this comes natural when it does come. Cunning don't get it, and dressmakers can't do it for you, but, as I say, it is born with some folks—it was with my lady, and it is with you, miss."

"Yes," said Mab, emphatically, "the Countess always looks nice."

Brooks pursed up her thin lips now, with a sort of pride, as she returned a short "Yes."

"I only hope she *will* be satisfied with me—she said a good many 'Hums,' Brooks, as I was ordering it," observed Mab, picking out the lace on her round white arms.

"She'll be satisfied, miss: she was a bit doubtful, and so was I. It would be a very trying dress to most young ladies, but you seem to know what suits you, and to have the courage to wear it."

"I always like to design things for myself," the girl explained. "I worked out this idea in the train as I came up. I like a dress to be distinctive, or it is nothing to me; I don't care to be one among a whole string of

fashion-plates, all more or less alike, only that some are pink, some blue, and some white. It must be horribly depressing for the onlookers to watch them all filing into a room in such uniform sameness."

"Hum! so 'tis, my dear," came from the open door, causing Mab to start.

The Countess, in purple satin and rare old laces, came in to inspect her little country daisy before going down to receive her guests.

"How *lovely* you look!" cried Mab, ecstatically; "and how splendidly your diamonds sparkle!" She had never seen the old lady like this before.

"Hum!"—smiling at Brooks—"you seem to forget all about yourself. She'll do, Brooks, I take it?"

"Yes, my lady," answered that functionary, who was in high good-humour.

"Hum!" ejaculated the Peeress, walking round the slight girlish form, "chic to the backbone, and that's everything, ain't it, Brooks? But all the same, it's not every

girl who'd dare to wear such a frock to their first London ball: they wouldn't have trust enough, for one thing," nodding her head so that the diamonds flashed again.

Lady Smalkington was quite right. Plain Indian muslin falling in full, softly crushed folds straight from the rounded waist to the ground, however pretty, is scarcely an imposing array. Mab Ellaby's was finished there by massed ruffles of yellowish lace, that waved round the well-poised feet "enough to bewilder a man" (at least, so said a rather sawny Guardsman—they can't all be as perfect as gods—during the evening). From the waist upwards the fabric was gathered up over the bust, not pleated, nor gauged, twisted, or worried into any unnatural set, but merely drawn up to what I believe in dressmaking parlance is termed "half-height," whence the full white throat rose out of more masses of lace. And that was all.

Who was it said "that any woman, old or young, might be beautiful if she only wore lace enough?"

Mabel Ellaby's only jewels were the amethyst of her violet eyes, the amber of her sunny hair, the coral of the curved lips which showed in happy smiles the pearly teeth within, nor did she desire others.

As she stood shyly by her hostess's side, waiting to make her first *entrée* into real London life, she attracted the attention of many who passed her. Some admired her, and others—shall I be very strict and not even pare the truth?—were struck with envy.

“How sweet, fresh, and pure you look, child,” said Philip Dyketon, surveying her with undisguised satisfaction. “I was half afraid for you.”

“Afraid for me?” repeated Mab, truly glad to hear a familiar voice among the moving throng of strange faces and flashing jewels.

“Ay, I was unwilling my little Phyllis should be drawn into, and, perhaps, be bewildered and spoiled by the garishness of so-called town pleasures; but I need not have

feared, you are yourself, and undismayed by the ordeal."

A burning blush suffused the girlish face, which paled as suddenly, and the small hand he held trembled in his like a trapped bird.

Philip Dyketon experienced a corresponding sense of strong emotion, but it was not an echo of the love he could see, or thought he saw, in this young creature's innocent eyes. It might be a thrill of amaze—of surprised awaking, even of regret, but it was not love.

"Have you left them all well at home, child?" he asked, after a brief pause, in a steady, even voice, which did much to check the painful heart-flutter which his first words had occasioned her.

She bravely collected her scattered forces, and answered him almost as calmly, though she was inwardly conscious of the trembling in her voice.

Pluck told.

He determined to procure for her some of

the best men, as partners, the room contained ; but he was not put to much trouble, for after the first waltz she was besieged by eager applicants, who promptly obtained introductions.

“ That child is a huge success,” said the Countess to him, two hours later, “ and her unconsciousness is inimitable. Half the room is busied with inquiries as to who she is, while the other half is gazing at her with venomous spite. I needn’t particularise which is which,” she laughed. “ Queer, ain’t it, when she’s just nobody—only a medium-sized country girl, with a frock on that, on my honour, only cost five pounds, all told ? ”

Philip Dyketon made no reply ; indeed, he had no opportunity to do so, for the old lady walked away in pleased repartee with a certain contemporary of hers known as a terror for caustic wit among the younger generation of his class, leaving him thoughtful and preoccupied.

He was satisfied by Mab’s satisfactory *début*, and glad that she should be happy.

“Was she happy, though?” he asked himself, growing alarmed and uncomfortable.

He had discovered in her eyes a love which in that unguarded instant she had not tried to conceal. Had he been blind hitherto? She had rallied with all her own high courage, but he settled in his own mind that he would absent himself for a time. He would accept an invitation he had had only that morning to go for a prolonged fishing excursion to Norway—he knew the especial fiord well—it was a good chance.

To his strictly honourable nature, and in his kindly mood, it was torture that, through him, this unworldly, true-hearted child should suffer aught. No vanity was in his self-communings to render them sordid or vacuous. He reasoned simply and honestly, as such a man would reason, finding himself the possessor of a pure love he could not reciprocate.

“Poor child!” he muttered to himself next, with a very worried air, and at that moment,

as he met Mab's glance over her partner's shoulder, his pity was near akin to love.

Nora, very lovely in cream satin, and her young sister were chatting rather eagerly together towards the close of the festivities, when he walked up to them for his last dance.

"This is our waltz, Mrs. Erskine," he said, not looking at Mab.

"Yes; and, dear Mr. Dyketon, would you mind sitting it out with me?" asked Nora still eager. "I have something I wish so much to say to you."

"Certainly," he made answer, concluding by her manner that the "something" was pressing.

Just then a partner claimed Mab, who would have much preferred staying with them, but departed obediently at Nora's matronly bidding: "Go, dear, I will tell him all about it." Then she turned to Philip Dyketon, and rapidly recounted to him Mab's strange interview with the mysterious man in the summer-house at Little Marsdon.

He listened politely, but was by no means especially interested, until she said, "Do you not see what has occurred to me?"

"No," he made reply, and feeling rather amused than otherwise. "I really cannot lay claim to such perspicacity."

"But," laying her hand on his arm, "the name on his card"—her face was quivering now with excitement—"do you not see? The man is without doubt *Arthur Geraint Thistleden*."

"Why without doubt?" he asked, but was, nevertheless, startled by her words and air of conviction. He knew the calmness of this woman, and the correctness of her judgment too well to pooh-pooh any statement she may make.

"It is such an uncommon name, Mr. Dyketon."

He stared at her: in the confused state of his own mind he was dumbfounded, and it was well they had a retired spot in the conservatory to themselves.

"Do you not think," giving him a slight

shake in her impetuous anxiety, "that I am right?"

"God knows!" he answered, after what appeared to Nora Erskine an intolerably long pause. "You may be."

She lay back in her seat as if her excitement might have exhausted her, and he continued slowly, "You say that this fellow was curious about the Elf?"

"Yes," sitting up, "he was, *very*. He appeared, Mab says, to know her, or to have known some one like her."

"I do not see any possible connection in this fact with Arthur Thistleden."

"No—nor I," allowed Nora, hesitatingly, still unconvinced.

"It is more probable," drawing his silk handkerchief across his brow, "it may prove to be some clue to her identity, poor child, and for that——"

"You would be glad," broke in Nora, all alert again.

"No, sorry," he answered, sadly enough. "Somehow I am grown content now with

things as they are. Yes, I should be distressed. I do not welcome change of any kind easily, and should shrink from it sorely in this case."

"But the name *Geraint*," persisted Nora, although his words and the troubled tone in which they were uttered perplexed her, "is so very marked."

The man was fighting against conviction, fearing, dreading he knew not what; half believing, yet not desirous of such being pushed any further. He was even a trifle bored by his companion's insistence. He watched the dancers as they swirled past the open doorway a little glumly, and Nora, looking at him, felt angry at his want of sympathy. It was so unlike him, she considered, heaving a sigh that roused him from his sullenness, if sullenness it was.

"Do not think me unsympathetic," he said, turning round to face her, "but it does not strike me so. The man is an actor, and it may be a taking and very easily chosen *nom de guerre*."

“ True, I never thought of that.”

“ If it was Arthur Thistleden, what possible effect *could* Annabel Westgate have on him ? ”

“ None whatever,” said Nora. “ I grant you that, yet, still——”

“ Which means so much with you ladies,” he smiled.

“ Should you know Arthur Thistleden if you were to see him, Mr. Dyketon ? ” inquired she, ignoring his last remark.

“ I scarcely know. Perhaps, but I think not, and,” he added with some haste, “ I have no wish to move in the matter.”

“ I am disappointed,” said Nora, with perceptible coldness. “ I thought you would have been so ready to enter into my feelings.”

“ I am,” he replied, hurt at her reproach, “ but I cannot tell you how I shrink from finding any clue to that poor child’s birth. It is a touch of my old morbidness which will have to be set aside if necessary, but I do not court the necessity. I have an unconquerable

prejudice that nothing but pain would be the outcome of any fresh knowledge." He leaned forward and let his head rest in his hands as if weary, then he looked up, saying, "You see, I am by nature extremely tenacious."

"So am I," said Nora, still coldly; "and I am fully impressed with the opposite view of the question, and am persuaded the man is Arthur Thistleden. I cannot follow the morbidness of your fears, and think them unreal and fastidious."

She half rose, but he detained her. "What does Mab think?" he asked.

"Ah," dropping into her seat once more. "I have said nothing to her of my suspicion: it was better not. The coincidence of the name did not occur to her at all, apparently: possibly she may never have heard it. Oh! if it is he," her voice rising to a little wail of distress, and all her resentment dying away, "where is my poor sister?"

"Do not excite yourself, dear Mrs. Erskine. I cannot believe you are right.

Had it been as you fancy, you would have heard from *her*. This fellow, you say, spoke to Mab of having been years in England?"

"Yes, he did; but," as some new idea seized her, "will you do one thing for me, Mr. Dyketon? I cannot help asking it of you, though perhaps I ought not."

"I will do anything for you that is in my power."

"Then," said Nora, producing the card Mab had given her, "will you go to —, see the man act, and report to me whether in your opinion it is Thistleden or not?"

Philip Dyketon drew his breath as though the request was something far more difficult; yet how easy it was in reality, and how natural she should make it! It merely entailed a short journey—a visit to a provincial theatre, to see—whom?

CHAPTER IX.

A CHARITABLE ERRAND.

"THAT girl is certainly obliging," said Lady Ju to her sister the next morning, when Mab had good-naturedly started for some East-end purlieu, to visit an old fellow for her in whom the Reverend Deraclose was much interested.

"She is a dear little thing, and how bright and fresh she looks after the excitement of last night ! I declare we are fagged to death. I don't know, though, what mamma will say to our letting her go alone."

"Oh, the servants are all busy," yawned Lady Juliana ; "and, besides, it is of no consequence in her case."

"But she is our visitor, Ju."

Lady Ju finished her yawn, but did not pursue the conversation. Meanwhile Mab went her way, on business intent, to the nearest cabstand.

“Drive me to 101, — Lane, Holborn,” she said to the driver of a hansom which she picked out as having the best horse.

“Yes, lady,” he replied, rather surprised, however.

On alighting, the man, a good fellow, civilly asked her how long she would be. “Not very long,” she answered brightly. “Why?”

“Because, lady, I’d like to keep about and see you safe back again.”

“Well,” said Mab, independently, “that is as you like, but don’t lose another fare on my account.”

“She’ve a-got all *her* buttons on,” said he to himself, as she disappeared within No. 101; “all the same, I *shall* keep about. She ain’t exactly the sort to ride about ’ere down in O’born alone in a ’ansom.”

“Are you Mr. Holmes?” inquired Mab, putting her head in at a door on the third storey of the ramshackle tenement in which she found herself.

“Yes, miss, that’s my name. Will you

kindly step in, ma'am ? and excuse my rising —I'm paralysed, worse luck."

She went in at once, and seated herself by the old man's side, explaining that she had come for Lady Juliana Smalkington, as she was not very well.

"And I'm sure it's good to see such a bonnie young lady," said the old fellow, scanning her critically, "you looks as fresh as a bunch o' spring flowers, miss."

"Do I?" Mab doubted if he would credit that she had danced till daybreak, and cried herself to sleep till the sun woke her out of her first dream. Surely Mab was getting used to this process, known to feminine minds as crying oneself to sleep. He would not, had she told him, so much does youth and a good constitution cover.

He was a shrewd old fellow, with twinkling eyes and reddish hair. There was so much character, too, in the withered face, that Mab concluded he could tell many queer tales of combats fought and won on life's battlefield ; and as he was intelligent and talkative to

garrulity, she very willingly prolonged her stay.

After the business upon which Lady Ju had sent her was despatched, he asked Mab, with the apparent desire of retaining her company, "To what theatres she had been to lately?" and was intensely amused when she answered she had only been to one in her life.

"Sakes alive!" he rejoined incredulously. "To think of that, now! And what might you have seen that time?"

"What play, do you mean?" she said, "'David Garrick.'"

"Ay, and who'd played it, miss?"

"I really forget," said Mab, honestly. "You see, I was so engrossed with the play, I never thought who was acting."

"Ay, to you, maybe now, it was David Garrick himself."

"Yes," said Mab, eagerly, "it was."

"The likes o' that, now—to hear her!" chuckled the old man. "Well, well, well," and he rubbed his poor shrunken palms together quietly.

"You seem to know a great deal about it—the theatre, I mean?" said Mab.

"I ought to, miss, considering I was stage-doorkeeper to one for a matter o' forty odd years."

"Really! I suppose, Mr. Holmes, it is a life very different to the ordinary ones, that actors and actresses live?"

She was thinking of the only person she knew who belonged to that charmed profession—Mr. Cecil Geraint."

"Well, miss," answered the veteran, much gratified, "it is and it isn't, mostly according to the stuff them's separately made of. Some of 'em's commonplace enough, the Lord knows, and some of 'em, naturally, is just the very opposite. Then there's the good and the bad among 'em—not hard to distinguish, either. 'Tisn't which is which, for most things is pretty much on the surface in the pro."

"They must be very clever," said Mab.

He chuckled again. "So-so."

"And they must live a kind of double life, I should think," reflectively.

He was peering sharply at her as he replied, "Yes, you ain't far short of the mark. I see what you mean, yet I don't know that, either; it's open to question. They mostly lives *within their life*, if you can follow my idee, little lady. They seldom cares overmuch to go out beyond it. As a rule they only looks on other folk as their *paying public*, jest that; and they scarcely haves a thought outside the theatre—at least, that's my opinion; but this, of course, is more particularly the way with they as have been bred and born to it, so to say."

"Do they not work very, very hard?" inquired Mab, anxious to learn more.

"You're right enough there, and that shows your common-sense, miss, if anything would. Now, most folks thinks 'tis a play-game, but it's about as hard a one, take it all round, as I knows of; but here, again, the being bred to 't tells, you see."

"Yes, of course, naturally," assented Mab hoping he would go on.

He had not such a listener every day, and

was nothing loth to proceed. "Now, you see, miss, *you*, for instance," forcibly, "not being used to it, would find the strain of it very exhausting—brain is at work as well as body, 'cept jest for some as don't count save for jest looking at, and as stop-gaps. And then," becoming warm with his subject, "there's the rehearsals. Lord! I've seen 'em come out o' some o' them dead-beat, a whole company fairly used up, and you'd wonder how on earth they'd *come up to time*, as the pugilists say, when the curtain goes up. And then there's a deal that's trying to the temper as they've got to put up with."

"I thought all clever actors and actresses did just as they liked," said Mab, "or else they wouldn't play."

"Did you, now. Only to hear her!" said the queer little man, much tickled. "More they don't in books and novels, I believe; but behind the scenes 'tis jest one in a dozen as dares carry on too many of them pranks. They've mostly got to 'lie low and sing small,' as the sayin' is—leastwise, till they

holds their public." Mab looked mystified here, so he explained, "Till they makes a big hit, you see; then, of course, the managers don't get it quite so much their own way. Still, most players knows well what 'tis to practise a deal o' self-restraint, for the public's kittle cattle, and not to be counted on. Talk about fatigue over rehearsals—now, I remembers so well as if but yesterday a poor young creature—clever as daylight she was—as used to lodge with us (years ago it was, when we wasn't so poor as I am now)," glancing round the poorly furnished apartment—"a fine set-up, handsome lass, to be sure, as ever stepped in shoe leather. And fine and bright at her profession she was, and sharp as a needle at character parts, though for all that her heart was as heavy as lead. But there's them as says, don't you know, miss, that the more wretched a woman is, the better actress she makes; that unless she have tasted heart-misery herself, she never reaches what they call the sublime in emotional parts.

'Tis a cruel thought, ain't it? and yet, mind, it ain't far wrong. For instance, this young creature I'm speakin' of couldn't live without she was acting; she got like as if she dursn't stop to think, or allow her mind to dwell a single instant on anything but her work—kind of feverish she was, and used to slave herself to death studyin' fresh parts, long after she ought to ha' been asleep at nights. But, Lord! there seemed at last no rest in her, when, savin' your presence, miss, it come out as she wus in trouble, as they calls what should be a woman's glory. Cursed be the villain," he said excitedly, "as brought it on her, and then left her to shift for herself, and to take to play-actin'!"

He seemed likely to drop into silence here, so Mab, who was keenly following his story, remarked, "She had not been brought up to it, then?"

"No, no; not a bit of it," softly blowing his nose, "save in drawing-rooms and sick-like, which is about as much like the real thing as chalk's like cheese. But, you see,

she had genius, and genius knocks jest talent out o' the running; and then she was handsome, and that's everything. Lord! I can see her now, as she come one day from the manager's room—a rough lot he were—cryin' quietly she was, poor thing! 'What *shall* I do, Mr. Holmes?' she says, in a sort o' despair. 'I have lost the engagement because my hair is dark instead of light, and the salary would have been a fortune to me—ten pounds a week.' 'Wigs not allowed?' I asked her. 'No,' she ses, still cryin', but tryin' hard to control herself. 'Lor, miss,' says I, and I laughed, to cheer her up a bit, 'any one can see easy enough you wasn't brought up to the stage. Why,' and I leaned forward as she was goin' to pass out into the street—I was doorkeeper, you recklect—and I says, '*why, dye it*. Go back and tell him as you'll come on for the part with your hair as gold as *hart* can make it. Jest let it down about your shoulders, and let him see its beauty. It's all a matter o' business, my dear; and don't be afeard, you'll win yet.'

She seemed to shrink, and quivered all over; but she kind o' shook herself together, and went back all of a hurry, and presently out she come again, her face all of a beam, and with the lines in her hand. 'I have you to thank for this, Mr. Holmes,' she said, smilin', though she was a bit flushed and tremblin', and I could see how she was suffering and how she dreaded it. But my missus was a dresser, you see, miss, and soon managed it for her—not a move in the makin'-up business but what she was up to. Well, miss, she played that part—and a long run the piece had, too—jest so long as ever she could, till the management spotted how 'twas with her—begging your pardon—and then 'twas a case of a week's notice, d'you see. It cut her up terrible. But, to cut a long story short, things got worse, and worse, and worse. We did all we could for her, pretty lamb, but 'twas awful tryin'; her spirit was fair broke. We'd 'a' seen her through it all; but one night, when we come home from the theatre—a bitter raw night it were, and mind

me, I treated ourselves to a cab—she was gone; and only a blessed slip o' paper could we find high nor low, which said that she should come back to us after a certain time, if she lived. I've always been sorry as how I tore up that paper, but I did. I was in such a rage, you see, and didn't stop for nothing."

"And did she?" asked Mab, strangely stirred by this romantic story

"No, young lady," sadly, "from that time to this I've never heard a word about that poor girl, and it's only one of the many strange tales I could tell you. Poor young gel, the Lord only knows what became of her—a real high-bred one she was, too, quiet and reserved; more's the pity, or we might have known more about her, or 'a' had some clue to follow. But she hadn't a clappin' tongue as some women has, who, may be, has less to talk about. Of course," he went on, "a thousand things may have happened, but I fancy if she lived through it, missy, she'd 'a' come back to us, for she always

seemed so grateful for all we did for her—not that it was much, but we did what we could to sort o' smooth things over for her, you see, and she didn't appear to have no friends, and she kept herself to herself. Though she was always civil and gracious like to the rest of the company, she never chummed with 'em, never went nowhere—for no Sundays out to Richmond, nor nothing o' that."

"What was her name?" Mab asked, looking at her watch.

"Well, her stage name was Hilda Denby, but that goes for nothin' in our line. This much I do know, through a few words she let drop to my missus, that it wasn't her real one; and good-bye, miss, if you must go. I'm main glad to have seen you, and hope as some day I may again, and good luck to you, miss."

Mab thanked him, shook hands, and ran quickly down into the street, for it was late. There was no hansom in attendance—the man had gone, doubtless tired of waiting for

her. She therefore walked briskly on a few hundred yards in search of another cab, without the slightest notion whither she was going, and having secured one, was not surprised to find that the driver, on hearing her address, turned his horse's head in a totally different direction.

CHAPTER X

BOREDOM.

A SOFT drizzling rain was falling as Philip Dyketon, after his conversation with Mrs. Erskine, left the ball-room and made his way down the crowded staircase to the street. Here he was hemmed in by a continuous string of waiting carriages and cabs. Knowing it was hopeless for him to endeavour to engage one for himself, he proceeded homewards on foot in no amiable mood.

All he could realise at present was, that he had promised to perform a disagreeable task, the achievement of which might be productive of grave, perchance unpleasant results to himself.

Then came the remembrance of his decision early in the evening, and the cause of that hasty decision—the discovery of Mab Ellaby's love for him. This last was a

trouble, and in its present stage an irritation to him.

He wished as he strode along in the now fast-falling rain, that the fishing expedition had necessitated his departure at once ; but as a telegram sent off in the morning would settle it, he could not—with a good grace—have given that as a reason to Nora Erskine for declining to carry out her mission.

“ And, after all,” he muttered, as the damp penetrated his thin overcoat, “ it may be a fool’s errand.”

Here, to complete his discomfiture, he slipped on a piece of orange-peel, and gave vent to a tolerably strong expression as a set-off against the accident.

“ Oh! hang this rain,” he exclaimed aloud, and was devoutly thankful to be able now to hire a hansom, in which he would be sheltered from the downpour.

He had no sooner given his address than he resumed his cogitations : “ Will this brute prove to be Mary Ellaby’s husband—for women’s rapidly formed conclusions are so

often right—or will he have, as he cannot help dreading, some connection with Annabel, and if so—what? or will it simply be altogether a mare's-nest, with no relation to either? Probably it would. The wretched cad resting in that accessible harbour may have been an entire stranger—what more likely?”

He was more at ease after adopting this practical idea, and began to plume himself on its reasonableness, even joking himself at the unnecessary fuss into which he had put himself concerning it.

He desired, above everything, that affairs in regard to Annabel Westgate should remain as they were, being convinced that any material change would be for the worse, or, at any rate, induce an unsettled state, which was what he abhorred generally.

Everything had gone on quietly for so many years that he positively shrank from disturbance, and then, again, he was anxious to maintain his relations with the Ellabys, or all of whom he had an affectionate regard.

At this point Mab's tell-tale face rose before him. "Why was it," he asked himself almost querulously, "that the love he had involuntarily called forth awoke no responsive chord in his heart?"

It had startled him at the time; it vexed him sorely now. Was it possible he had been in any way to blame?

But, clearly, he had no charge to lay against himself in this respect, and perhaps, after all, he might have been mistaken. He was not a vain fool to imagine that every woman who blushed and trembled in his presence was in love with him.

Here he thought of Gwen Smalkington, and his irritation found passage in a short laugh. Yes, he must go on this absurd journey, as he had weakly let himself be drawn into the affair, and his word was given; and, after all, what concern can it be of his?

Just now he twisted a button off his shirt, for he had reached his room by this time. "Poor little thing!" he murmured, not referring to the unattached shirt-button, but

to the Elf, "she is well placed now, and the school plans are so nicely made, but this may turn out a nasty business for her." He was harking back to his old fear.

Philip Dyketon was a man peculiarly unaccustomed to cope with disagreeables. Save for that harassing, morbid sorrow regarding his mother, he had been so free from any sort of worldly trouble, and had experienced in his calm existence no twists of fortune or untoward event. He wished nothing more than that the child, thrown into his life by so uncommon a chance, should remain quietly as she was till her girlhood should be an assured fact, when——

"When, what?" conscience dinned into his brain. "What *had* he been going to say?"

His meditations were at a deadlock, and he looked round the room, half longing for his own familiar chamber at home, where no such confounded worries attacked him. He would go back at once—no, that he could not do, for home meant Mab Ellaby, and had he not made up his mind to go to Norway with

those fellows, to which destination they must start the third day from this ?

His appearance was dismal enough as he seated himself on a bedroom chair set at an angle to a half-open portmanteau, which collapsed suddenly, and caught his toe pretty sharply with a grip that was anything but soothing to his perturbed state.

Thus do small aggravations swarm upon graver perplexities; but Philip Dyketon did not resent this one—he scarcely noticed it, in fact, but continued to sit musingly for some considerable time, coming out of the fit of abstraction to say, “Surely it doesn’t amount to this, that I am in love with a baby of ten years old !” At this he tore off his clothes, and rapidly prepared to snatch an hour or two’s rest before starting for ——.

At this time Nurse Geddings was busy making sets of new clothing for Annabel Westgate, under Mrs. Ellaby’s supervision ; for she was going at once to a school near London which Countess Smalkington had selected for her.

This step had been mooted before Philip Dyketon left home on his hearing of Dorothy's engagement to Clement Danes, and since then other events had rather hastened the arrangement, for Dorothy's wedding was likely to be fixed for an early date.

At Marsdon changes had occurred, and much consternation was afloat there. Two prominent characters in the town had died suddenly—poor Mrs. Snelling and Dr. Tooley, of High Street.

The latter eccentric old man had apparently known the nature of his disease to a nicety when he sent for Clement Danes, not to treat him professionally, but to tell him brusquely to attend the funeral as his medical officer, and to be present at the reading of his will afterwards—adding, in his sister's presence, that it was a strong desire of his that Clement's marriage with Miss Ellaby should be solemnised as soon as circumstances should permit.

The old physician had accomplished his

fondest hope, his highest ambition—he had died rich. His will it was which raised such surprise in Marsdon. It was very brief, and ran thus:—

“To my sister, Margaret Tooley, half of my estate. The rest I bequeath to Clement Danes, together with my practice ; provided he consent to take Robert Snelling into partnership ; that he marries Dorothy Ellaby, and settles in No. 89, High Street, Marsdon, after pensioning off my trusted servants as Margaret Tooley shall direct.”

This startling news had flown about the vicinity like the proverbial wildfire, and set in motion a very babel of tongues. It was at once forwarded to Philip Dyketon at his club, to Mab Ellaby at Park Lane, and to Nora Erskine, and so it was deemed expedient to send Annabel Westgate off to school without further delay.

Mab received strict injunctions from her mother not to allow this alteration in the family plans to curtail her visit in any way, and as Dorothy was coming up to stay with Nora in Curzon Street to select her bridal array, Mab decided to remain. She was

very happy in her present home. The Countess, as usual, made much of her, and the daughters were not unkind; in fact, after that unselfish errand to Holborn, Lady Ju had even been gracious to her, while her now acknowledged suitor, the Rev. Theodosius Deraclose, was extremely friendly. This marriage was to come off in town, at the end of the season; so here, too, wedding finery was in full swing.

When Philip Dyketon entered the theatre at —— he was not long in doubt as to the personality of him of whom he had come in quest. Undeniably that man on the stage, acting a commonplace part, was Arthur Geraint Thistleden. The face was little altered from that of the lad who nodded insolently to him so long ago when he was driven past by John Datchet.

Philip was also aware that he, too, was recognised as he seated himself in the narrow row of stalls, although the man coolly went on with his duties. Nor was he wrong in this conjecture, for presently a note

was brought to him by an attendant—a thin, twisted bit of paper torn from a pocket-book.

He took it with undisguised annoyance. He had not calculated on recognition, or he would most certainly have chosen a less prominent place. The pencilled words were:—

“It will be a great convenience to me if you will see me after the curtain is down. I have something of mutual interest to communicate.

“Yours,

“THISTLEDEN.”

An angry frown contracted his forehead as he read the lines and noticed the signature, written in a free, big hand that savoured of bold offensiveness.

But his fears were allayed—the fellow could have nothing to do with the Elf. He had openly proclaimed himself to be Thistleden, and was therefore Mary Ellaby's husband. On one of his own cards he wrote a few words of acquiescence, and handed it to the attendant, whose attitude was extremely suggestive of “tips;” but it was lost on Philip,

who was too much engrossed with his own thoughts. What on earth could Thistleden want with him? And what the d——l of *mutual* interest could he have to impart? Was he going to dispute his rights to the Grange property? He might have it and welcome. Lastly, why had he not sought out the Ellabys instead of him?

While the abominable orchestra was bungling through some Scotch airs he tumbled into another quagmire of worry. Was Mary Ellaby—the wife of this actor—alive? Was she even with him at this very place? It was a painful conglomeration for the family in any case, for the man had “rascal” written in plain characters on his handsome, daring countenance, if ever a fellow had.

The distracting (so-called) music nearly drove him crazy, and when the second scene opened with a sickening jealous quarrel between some vulgar lovers, an angry expletive that was anything but complimentary to the performers escaped him. He could

not keep in subjection the restlessness that tortured him. To sit still was impossible, at least he could procure temporary freedom from beholding such intolerable fooldom. He saw no valid reason why he should sit out such trash while there was a lobby to which he could retire.

This only sufficed him a few minutes, and from it he sauntered into the grimy vestibule, to contemplate, for his delectation, a frame of theatrical celebrities wherein Thistleden's face and figure, together with that of a yellow-haired siren with dark flashing eyes, were reproduced in many varieties of costume.

He gazed attentively at this woman. She was not the same he had seen acting in the present piece. Was it possible the eyes and the mouth were like Nora Erskine's? Good God! the eyes were—not the mouth—but those eyes, in one of the scenes where the woman was represented as inquiring, might be Nora's over again.

From very boredom he sank into a couch that looked inviting, being newly covered with crass ruby Utrecht velvet; but this was a snare and delusion—it was as hard and non-rest-giving as a seat could well be.

By-and-by a smart, dapper little man, with prominent cheekbones, whom he rightly conjectured to be the acting-manager, accosted him with the remark “that the evening was deuced unpleasant, enough to account for an emptier house. Are you waiting for anybody?” he inquired politely, evidently curious.

“Yes, I am; Mr. Geraint, the actor,” answered Philip, glad even of this little man’s company.

“Ah!” a little sharply, “he’ll not be off till after the curtain falls on the last act.” Hereupon the little man was called away on some stage business, and Philip Dyketon was once more alone.

He wandered disconsolately into the sloppy street—sloppy with black, greasy mud tha_t

made his footing insecure. In despair he went back to the vestibule, to which the dapper manager had returned, and was willing to talk to any extent.

"Waiting ain't the most pleasant of occupations," he remarked; "and it's a beastly night. Wouldn't your stall be better than this, eh?"

Philip shrugged his shoulders in reply. The man was civil and obliging, and he had no wish to insult him by invidious sneers at the performance.

"Geraint won't be at liberty for a good twenty minutes, and then he's got to dress, you see, and there's an infernal draught here. I'd recommend you to go to your hotel, 'pon my honour I would. Let him come to you."

Philip readily caught at this proposal, and gave his address promptly.

"Wonder if Geraint's up to any fresh devilry," mused the little man, as he watched Philip down the dirty street. "He's a loose fish, but we've got him pinned tight to this

engagement till Christmas, anyhow—none of your slidin' off, m' gentleman, this time ; though," scratching his chin, " I don't fancy this swell's in the pro."

CHAPTER XI.

HALF-BROTHERS.

PHILIP DYKETON, sitting by a struggling fire in a private room of the "Crown Hotel," listening for the approach of Geraint the actor, was still altogether at sea as to what he could possibly want with him, unless it was that, knowing of his close intimacy with the Ellabys, he wished to secure his good word with them. Even if this were so, he could not imagine how the "mutual" interest he mentioned existed.

He was one of those men, domestic creatures by habit, on whom cheerful surroundings act as a tonic or nerve soporific, and had kindled this fire in hopes that it would counteract the dismal sound of the drenching rain outside. But he was disappointed, for the air soon grew oppressive with heat-fumes of stale tobacco and vanished meals, while hintings of soot kept falling

from the long-disused chimney, and the fire itself showed unmistakable signs of smoking. To increase his discomfort, a growing conviction, not to be shaken off, settled upon him that something disagreeable was about to happen. Not an unlikely sensation with nerves so sensitively strung as were his. However desperately he tried to bring all his sterling common-sense to bear on it, there the feeling was, and he was completely under its deadening influence, when the door opened, and "Mr. Cecil Geraint" was announced.

"Ah," he said, rising from his seat by the hearth, while a hasty puff of smoke followed the opening of the door, "I was beginning to think you were not coming."

As a matter of fact, he had not been thinking any such thing; but irrelevant speeches are apt to escape from a man's lips when he is in as uncomfortable a frame of mind as Philip was—when common-sense is off the road and confusion rules the roost in his brain.

“Beast of a night,” remarked Geraint, calmly. “Awfully good of you to sit up for me, for I expect you’re one of the early-to-bed men, as a rule. You see, a mummer’s day, so to speak, only begins after the play. Your fire,” shivering slightly, “is about as sulky as a jealous woman.”

Perhaps he was not really so easy as he affected to be; for Philip Dyketon, fairly brought to bay, face to face with the position, no longer shrank from it, and his natural dignity reasserted itself.

He carefully stirred the little fire before he contributed any further share to the conversation, and then waited for his visitor to state his business with a demeanour that was positive ice for coldness.

No statement being forthcoming, he asked quietly, “You wished to see me, Thistleden?”

“Ah, yes, Dyketon; I do,” answered the other, with a show of bravado, not to say insolence, in the careless tones. “The fact is,” seating himself at a sign from Philip, “I

went down to the old shop the other day, for the purpose of looking you up, and it was just my cross-grained luck to find you were in town. I had wasted a day I could ill spare. By-the-bye," suddenly, "what brings *you* here?"

It was an embarrassing question, put thus with point-blank directness at the commencement of the interview, before the outworks of its import had been opened up.

Philip Dyketon felt his position decidedly awkward, and he sat a moment drumming his fingers on the table—nervously, Geraint thought; but it was not nervousness, he found, when met with the steady reply, "I presume there is no use in our beating about the bush, Thistleden, so I will tell you plainly how and why I am here. When you went down to the Grange a week ago you saw Miss Ellaby?"

"Yes; and a deuced plucky little girl she is too. No offence, Dyketon. I never saw," with truthful emphasis, "a woman in my life who fetched me so." Seeing Philip's face

darken ominously, he broke off lightly, "You take first innings, old man, and I'm all respectful attention, and then we'll proceed to business." So saying, he spread out his well-shaped limbs, with his feet towards the fire, which still had that sulky tendency to smoke.

"She is in town now," Philip went on concisely, "and she mentioned her interview with you to her married sister, Mrs. Erskine, who immediately concluded, from the name on your card, that you were her sister Mary's husband."

"Curse it!" muttered Thistledown between his teeth, "I never thought of that. How the *devil* did they know my name was Geraint?" he asked, with sudden fury.

"I *may* have mentioned it to them," answered Philip, with exasperating composure.

"And so," said the other, sneeringly, "you have done a little at putting two and two together, and you have been well set to work to make 'four' out of it, eh?"

“Do you wish to deny the identity?”

“No,” savagely; “’t isn’t worth while. A blown plot isn’t worth the keeping. So she sent you off as a faithful knight-errant to reconnoitre?”

“Exactly so,” said Philip, quietly.

“How the deuce,” with a mocked change of voice and attitude, “did *you* come to know these people, Dyketon?”

“In the ordinary course of events. They came down when the new railway was started. Mr. Ellaby is the resident agent.”

“The deuce he is! But, all the same, not wishing to flatter you or your position, I shouldn’t have thought ’em exactly in your line.”

To this Philip deigned no reply, and the other continued, “I don’t mind telling you I was knocked all of a heap when I heard the name. You see, I only knew one member of the family, and have no desire whatever to renew, or rather make acquaintance with any of the others.” He tried to laugh, but in the face of Philip Dyketon’s

stern demeanour it was but a futile effort.

“Then your connection with them has nothing to do with your seeking me?” asked Philip, and as he spoke he moistened his dry lips.

“None whatever, my dear fellow. Knowing they were about there only made it a trifle risky for me to run down again, and so I was precious glad when I saw you come into the theatre an hour ago, for I was funkèd, as I tell you, and it takes a lot to beat the wind out of my sails.”

Philip was fairly nonplussed, and looked it.

“By Jove!” said Thistleden, “things do crop up rum in this whirligig old world; but you,” eyeing him, “seem to find life pretty smooth, or have you also your skeleton or,” succeeding in forcing a laugh now, “your crumpled rose-leaf? Curse everything! I’ve been devilish hard hit lately. Some few years ago I was going to hunt you up—when down on my luck—but Fortune, like the tricksy jade she is, turned her wheel in

my favour, and I let you off for a space ; but now she has veered round again, and Pactolus don't flow my way. The Fates have rounded on me, and nearly run me aground—with a good chance ahead, too, if I could only command a couple of thousand, say, in a month's time."

"I do not follow you," said Philip. "I fail to see what all this has to do with me."

"Yes—well, now suppose I remove the scales from your eyes. Suppose, now," leaning across the table on his folded arms and fixing his eyes fully on his listener, "I was the fortunate fellow born of a mother in honourable wedlock—as they call the rite—and that that mother cut off with a villain and gave *me*, as a natural consequence, a half-brother without any choice of his own, do you see? Do you think *I* should grudge a helping hand if that brother came and asked, at a stiff pinch, for a drop out of my ocean of wealth? *No!*" sitting back in his chair, "I should not."

Philip Dyketon was dumbfounded at this

unexpected and undreamt-of issue to his perplexity.

“You must be rich as Cræsus, Dyketon, to say nothing of the Grange property. What the old heathen meant by leaving it to your father, I could never fathom.”

Philip, at these words, sprang to his feet, and paced the entire length and breadth of the room before he could bring himself to speak.

“For God’s sake,” he said hoarsely, “what does all this mean?”

“It means, Philip, that I—Thistleden—am your half-brother by our mother’s so-called shame with old Kirkburn, the veriest old scoundrel that ever lured a woman to destruction.”

Philip stretched out his hand appealingly, as if unable to endure more, and the action induced a softer tone in the speaker.

“It is pretty rough on you, Dyketon, and it must have been awfully so on your father: he was a good man, if ever there was one, and I always felt sorry for him, though I

hated you. You can never say I intruded on him. Poor old chap! some men can't take such tricks lightly, and I expect he was one of that sort, and then, poor wretches, it goes ill with 'em. For my part, I've kicked about the world and know life on its seamy side fairly well, and I say live and let live, and chance it. If a woman, gentle or simple, has a fancy for change, it's no use putting the curb on, she's bound sooner or later to kick over the traces. I always give 'em their head myself; perhaps I've a fellow-feeling on the subject of change," he remarked, with a slight laugh that jarred on his listener. "The world is tolerably severe on the weaker sex, eh? and they haven't always smooth sailing with us, either. By-the-bye, how about your philanthropical tendencies in the 'ward' direction?"

The query was put with an amused snigger that disgusted and angered Philip beyond bearing, as he could not but perceive its insulting drift.

"My dear fellow," said Thistleden, with

vast relish, "don't cut up rusty. I have no desire to pry into your private affairs, and one cover is as good as another. Age precludes such a possibility, or I should have said she was another of old Kirkburn's brood fastened on us, she's remarkably like him."

"Have you quite finished?" asked Philip, his face white with passion. "I know no more who the child is than you do."

"Honour bright, and no d——d nonsense?" inquired Thistleden, completely staggered. "Well, all I can say is, you're playing a ticklish game, and both the girls—for she is scarcely a child, you know—are dead in love with you, and it may prove jolly awkward for you if you don't pick your steps. My advice is, stick to Mab Ellaby."

Philip was trembling with rage, but he controlled himself to say quietly, "We will drop the question, Thistleden."

"No offence, old man. I never lay a lead weight on my tongue, and am only giving you a friendly caution, and mean no harm whatever. I'm a soft-hearted fellow

enough at bottom, and I don't want now to make myself a howling nuisance to you. Of course you have the pull over me by birth, even if the same maternal blood does run in our veins. All I ask is that you will give me a round sum in filthy lucre to lift me over an uncommonly stiff fence. Not that you have any right to do it, or that I can claim anything at your hands. I'm not putting it that way. I merely ask it as a favour to a poor wandering chap, who, after all, can't help the misfortune of his birth."

"Since you put it so, and for the sake of her who is gone, I will do it," said Philip, huskily, dragging out his cheque-book.

"I tell you what," said Thistleden, leaning across the table, his face paler than usual by many shades. "I think your father would have done it."

It was a master stroke, and nerved Philip's hand to write out the cheque firmly, and to pass it over steadily.

"I cannot tell you how obliged I am," said Thistleden, drawing his handkerchief across

his brow. "This sum, paid down on the nail, secures me part interest in a rattling good theatrical venture in America—one that promises a rich harvest."

"And your wife?" asked Philip.

Thistleden now looked annoyed. "Scarcely that, yet," he remarked hesitatingly.

Philip's colour blazed up as he put out his hand as if he would have seized the cheque. "This indignity is too much," he cried hoarsely, thinking as he did so of his friends the Ellabys. "Surely you married her?"

"Oh, Mary Ellaby?"

"Mary *Thistleden*," corrected Philip, his eyes flashing.

"As you will. Can you tell me anything of her?"

"Anything of her! *I* tell *you* anything of her?" asked Philip, utterly bewildered. The two were at cross purposes.

"Is she not with her people?" asked the actor.

"With her people? No; they have heard

nothing of her since she wrote to them from Australia, when you were first married."

"Is that so?" Thistleden asked again, incredulously; but he saw the simple truth of the assertion in the other's face, and drew a long breath of intense relief—or was it *anxiety*?

He, too, paced the apartment from end to end, and came to a standstill before Philip Dyketon to say—

"Then I know no more of her whereabouts than you do."

The two stared at each other aghast, as at some terrible complication.

"Tell me all you can, for God's sake, Thistleden, and truthfully," going over to him. "Remember, I stand here as an emissary from her own people; and think, if you can, of their trouble, of what they have had to endure all along——"

Philip's very voice failed him here.

"Well," began Thistleden, "Mary Ellaby——"

"Mary *Thistleden*," broke in his adver-

sary, for so their relation to each assumed shape, "is it not so?"

"Yes, pardon me, I see what you mean, and I married her right enough—so far as the law of Scotland goes—but, O Lord! Dyketon, she wore me out with her plaguey tears and childish reproaches. She was a fiend for temper, and, Heaven forgive me, one day I told her the marriage was a sham, and she was no wife of mine, and poor, credulous simpleton, she believed it as gospel truth, and swore she would go to you with her wrongs, till I laughed her out of it by saying a fine lot you'd care for the wrongs of a bastard brother's mistress; all the same, as I'm a living sinner, I never imagined she fretted over it so much as she must have done. To cut the story short, she went off, as I concluded, to her own family, and I've never heard of her from that day to this. To tell the truth, I never wanted to hear. In seeking you, I never calculated on running across any of them; that's the unfortunate part of the whole concern."

"From a purely selfish point of view I suppose it is," said Philip, with undisguised weariness.

Geraint lightly shrugged his shoulders. "I don't put up for a Simon Pure, Dyketon, never did in my life—don't go in for moral tone and all that sanctimonious rot. I never ill-used her, I'll swear, although I was sick to death of her Puritan airs before we'd been married a month. Hang it! a fellow can't help his nature, any more than a leopard can change his skin."

It was very late, or rather early, when the men parted, without cordiality, but with a certain show of outward courtesy to each other.

"It's a downright rum start, to say the least of it," mused the actor Geraint, as he wended his way to his mean lodging, "but he's uncommonly easy to bleed. A couple of thousand at one go isn't to be sneezed at, and now, Em, my tawny-eyed termagant, we shall have things all our own way across the herring pond. I've done a good

stroke of 'biz' this journey, between you and me and the gate-post, although," walking very slowly, "I nearly missed my cue once or twice. These virtuous, high-minded blokes are slippery customers to do with—risky fish to fry, but I flatter myself this is a very successful dish. Can't marry her, though," he further apostrophised. "Now, there is this uncertainty about the other—curse the jade, with her d——d virtue. I wonder where she hooked it to? But I'll stick to Em till all's blue, so long as she doesn't come the whining and weeping dodge. Can't stand that at any price, life ain't long enough. Confound his blessed, sweet-souled innocence, how he——" But here he stopped his outspoken soliloquy, lest the very air should gather up and whisper abroad his secrets.

CHAPTER XII.

A BLOW FROM THE DEAD.

ON his return to town Philip Dyketon instead of calling on Nora at Curzon Street, bent his steps to the Temple, where he saw her husband, and clearly and concisely put before him the outcome of his meeting with Arthur Thistleden.

They consulted together about the advisability of telling all this to the rest of the family, and finally Tom Erskine concluded that at the present stage it was not necessary to do so. "If," he continued, "you think the fellow really knows nothing of his wife's whereabouts, what good can the information possibly do? Besides, why should you put yourself to the pain of announcing the degrading relationship that exists between yourself and Thistleden? My only stipulation is that I may tell my wife; as for Mab,

she is but a child, and does not suspect anything, why should we arouse her suspicions? Such things are much better worked out on the quiet."

"Worked out?" said Philip, not quite understanding the other.

"I mean, Dyketon," Tom explained, "that if the affair *is* to come out, it will in the long run, and meanwhile neither of us must fail to keep our eyes and ears open concerning the fate of Mary Ellaby, for she may be, and probably is, still living."

"There is one more person to whom I should like to speak of it," said Philip, thoughtfully—"the Countess."

"Yes," said Tom Erskine, with the reserve of professional caution, "she might be told in confidence; she is a wise, shrewd old woman, and will know how to act in any emergency. Yes, you may as well tell her, perhaps."

And so the Countess was included in the secret; but after listening to Philip's recital with manifest curiosity, she made no remark

about it beyond ejecting a single but very emphatic "Hum!" She assured him, however, of her absolute respect for the confidence he had reposed in her, and of her willingness to help him or the Ellabys, should occasion arise.

"The reptile! the thorough-paced rascal!" said the worldly old creature between her firmly-set false teeth, when the door closed upon her visitor, "the bold, lying rascal!" and it is to be presumed she was not alluding to her friend and neighbour.

This interview over, Philip started without further delay for Southampton, the first stage of his fishing tour, contenting himself with farewell messages only to Nora and Mab, nor did he see the Elf, who had arrived in London that afternoon on her way to school.

Clement Danes behaved extremely well with regard to the general arrangements which devolved upon him through his sudden accession to fortune, and he showed in some respects a generosity and perception with which he had not hitherto been credited.

Some alleged that the young doctor had an inkling beforehand of the manner in which the property was to be disposed, but this was malicious and a mistake. No one who heard that eccentric will read was in more complete ignorance of its contents than he. Neither did the remarks about his speedy marriage set him thinking. Miss Tooley and Dorothy were such fast friends, and so often together, that he presumed the request was made more in deference to the sister than from any personal liking for himself.

Miss Margaret Tooley was the one who was most astounded at the purport of the document. She who had been mistress of the old house in the High Street for fifty years was to turn out with scant ceremony to make room for this pushing young practitioner, whose advent in their midst she had, from the first, bitterly resented. Certainly, she had tolerated him of late, for dear Dorothy's sake. The girl loved him, so there must be some latent good in the man ; but to be rounded on, after his death, by her

brother, whom she had ruled with a rod of iron during his lifetime, was too much. The shifty meanness of it disgusted her; "but," she observed, with proud acrimony, "Jabez always was shifty."

She had "Pish-d" and "Pshaw-d" at the "degrees" which Clement Danes paraded with natural pride, and at the style he affected. "As if," she had been wont to say to her intimates, "a gig and a man out of livery was not good enough for him. It has been for Jabez. And as for a night brougham, good gracious! to what is the world coming? A reefer coat and a heavy rug across his knees has been sufficient for Jabez. Well, fools and their money were soon parted."

At the reading of the will she sat aghast, as if petrified with amazement. Her grey side curls might have been carved out of marble, so rigidly did they cling to either cheek.

And he, "the successful interloper," as she termed him, stood opposite to her, by the

dark oak dining-table, and, save for one spasmodic elevation of the thin shoulders, none could tell whether he was prepared or unprepared for the hearing which had turned her to stone, and, for the nonce, dried up within her every particle of the milk of human kindness.

In this terrible and crushing humiliation Dorothy was forgotten, and only the aggressor, with his insolent vanities, was before her.

The experience of that hour was the most cruel Margaret Tooley had ever borne, but she emerged with dignity from the fiery ordeal.

To give her her due, for the money she cared little, being, if anything, a generous-hearted woman. The half of her dead brother's riches, together with her own settled income, would make her wealthy, for a single woman. It was giving up her home to an alien, by that brother's request, and thus lowering her in it in the eyes of the old servants, which probed her pride, stung her

to the quick, and kept that angry spot alive on the withered cheek-bones.

The one sweet drop that enabled her to swallow the nauseous draught before any harsh words escaped the tightly-drawn lips, was her sincere love for Dorothy Ellaby. *The girl would benefit*, and for her sake she summoned sufficient self-possession to descend from her throne without disgrace.

David Trench cleared his throat after the reading, as if thoroughly glad his share of the mortification was over, and he considered it nothing short of mortification to have to put such a slight on his wife's old friend. He anticipated a scene, for Margaret Tooley was high-spirited; and sometimes high-voiced as well. He was, therefore, immensely satisfied at the silence that ensued upon his folding up his papers. There sat the statuesque figure, draped from head to foot in expensive crape, silent, but the eyes beneath the gold spectacles moved round the assembled group with a withering scorn that was pathetic. Clement Danes' position was not enviable just then.

It would have been far easier for him had Miss Tooley broken out into wordy wrath, but there she sat stonily still, like a carven image, except for those restless steel-grey eyes. He glanced inquiringly at Mr. Trench, who shrugged his shoulders in reply. Here he could give him no assistance.

“Don’t trouble, David Trench,” were the first incisive words that the stricken woman uttered, and the cold, satirical voice said, as plainly as accents could, “*You* at least might have warned me of this.”

Clement, thrown on his own resources, aided by his habitual *sang froid*, took his bearings at once, and very wisely; for, had he minced matters at all, or been in any degree apologetic, he would have fallen still more in the estimation of his irate enemy. He walked steadily round the long table, and stopping in front of her, fearlessly met her stony stare with a professional, almost a friendly, deference. “For Dorothy Ellaby’s sake, Miss Tooley, will you let it be peace between you and me?” he asked, with more

sympathy in the tones than his auditors expected.

It was the wisest speech he could have made, and showed peculiar tact and insight into character.

Miss Tooley was struck dumb, and for once she was at a loss how to answer—a very unusual situation for her, and one that made her distinctly uncomfortable. In her distress she plucked with nervous fingers at the bands of crape on the heavy gown, as if annoyed that they were there. Was it for this she had loaded herself with woe trappings for a brother who had slunk into his grave out of the way of her just resentment?

“I am sorry for you, Miss Tooley—but, I respect myself, and have no need to humble myself by apologising for what is as great a surprise to me as it can possibly be to you,” came from the thin even voice again.

“Well done,” murmured the Vicar of St. Mary’s to his neighbour, David Trench, who made some unintelligible rejoinder under the rustling of parchment sheets.

And then Margaret Tooley rose, and in the hearing of all who were witnesses of her mortification, said, "Clement Danes, I have been tricked and insulted, but not by you; and it is due to you that I should speak plainly all that is in my mind. I am not a grudging woman, and you are welcome to your good fortune. Professionally I have always disliked you, and have been jealous of you, and I have been unjust to you: I will say this much once for all. I can see now what it is that makes you so popular, and that will ensure your prosperity—you grasp the world as it is, with a firm grip, set your foot upon its neck, and fear no one—very good. For Dorothy Ellaby's sake—for I love the girl—it shall be as you wish: we will work together, if not at first exactly as friends, certainly not as enemies."

As she finished speaking, she allowed her hand to rest on the arm Clement held out for her, and as he led her away to the prim drawing-room, his cold nature was moved to find how violently she trembled.

“He’s master of the situation, remarked the Vicar, in the little bustle that followed their exit. “For my part, I have always liked Danes; he’s bound to make his way, and we want more of such men as he is in Marsdon: half of ’em lack the courage of the very opinions they profess to hold.”

From that day Miss Tooley cast aside the deep crape she had adopted for the brother whom she had ceased to *respect*, although she did not ignore his memory altogether by appearing in other than black dresses.

She let no grass grow under her feet in removing from the High Street into another house sufficiently near; and it was very evident that she leaned more and more upon the young doctor’s strong will, referring to him on many points which of old she had professed herself able to settle for herself and Jabez too.

He, in turn, invariably left minor matters to her sole control; for instance, he refused to have any say in the pensioning of the servants, and he consulted her about his

proposals for Mr. Snelling's admittance into the practice before submitting them to that gentleman. They were business-like to a degree, but generous, and no one doubted that the two men would work well together.

The mere obtainance of the partnership pleased a great number of people with whom Mr. Snelling was a favourite, and it had much to do with breaking through prejudices which the younger man had raised in minds unaccustomed to innovations either professionally or socially.

Then, too, his marriage was popular, everybody assuring everybody else "that Miss Dorothy Ellaby was a perfect model of a doctor's wife."

In an incredibly short time it ceased to be a surprise that Miss Tooley should drive down the High Street in Clement Danes' tiny brougham, though Miss Barbara Fleming, her oldest crony, noted in Marsdon circles for her sharp speeches, said, with some venom, "After that deluge."

No doubt a spice of jealousy occasioned

the trite remark ; “ For,” continued she, “ I never can get a quiet chat with Margaret Tooley now, she is so vastly engrossed with the Pendleton Grange people and the marriage. For my part, I see no sense in such incongruous friendship. When she has served their turn they’ll give her the cold shoulder, mark my words. Young folks nowadays are eaten up with pride and selfishness, and Dorothy Ellaby, with her empty little face—looking as meek as a lamb—is puffed up with vanity and conceit at making such a fine match. Ah, well ! we shall see what we shall see.”

CHAPTER XIII.

A LOVE THAT IS SILENT.

It was October, and

“ Summer doffs her garlands here,
And autumn turns to gold their green ;
To fruit their flower—to sad their cheer.”

But, to all appearance, every one was gay at the Grange, as the time appointed for the double wedding drew nigh.

Indeed, there was no cause for sadness, except that Annabel Westgate, who was spending her holidays with the Ellabys, regretted the absence of her guardian.

Why did he stay so long abroad? she wondered wistfully, though she made no such inquiry publicly; and if Mab's thoughts ran in the same channel, she demurely kept her own counsel, and might have discovered, had she so willed, a panacea for her heartache in the patient, unswerving devotion of Malcolm Trench.

As Frank Ellaby had obtained an extension of leave from his foreign work, it was arranged the two weddings should take place on Mab and Alec's twentieth birthday.

The orchard had lost much of its charm now: the branches were almost bare of the glistening leaves through which our lovers had gazed with blissful laziness at sunny summer skies. Now they were mostly to be found within doors, or on the southern slope of ground above the tennis court, where, if anywhere, some rays of sunlight lingered.

When very determined not to settle tamely down to an incoming winter, they would venture to disport themselves on sundry garden-seats, only to give it up in despair; for, although the fickle sun was shining, round a treacherous corner would creep insinuating chills.

The lawn was disfigured by the wormy creatures who, to quote Pope, "were at their dirty work again;" and Annabel Westgate experienced a dreary satisfaction in stamp-

ing down their unsightly hilly casts among the sodden turf.

She was growing rapidly into tall slimness of girlhood, and was at no pains, as she moved hither and thither at her cheerless occupation, to conceal her listlessness. Her guardian was ill—had caught a severe cold in that wretched fishing cruise. Then why had he gone to Egypt instead of coming home? It worried her more than she could tell. There was no pleasure in visiting her old home when he was absent from it. She had only gone once, and had been so truly miserable that no one could prevail upon her to repeat the experiment.

On the day before the ceremony a savour of decay filled the air. A heavy moisture overhung shrubs and palings as she contemplated a clump of large dahlias, from whose drooping heads the earwigs crawled dejectedly. Small wonder if, oppressed by the dreariness around her, she brushed some secret tears away.

Within doors all was merry confusion, from

which, with proud reticence and perhaps some jealousy, she could not help shrinking. Nora and her husband were hourly expected. "But what is that to me?" thought the girl: "we are not expecting *him*. If we were, I should be very different."

Yes, Nora and Tom Erskine were hourly expected, and would come among them fresh from the cheeriness that always pervades town life at that season of the year when pleasant, cosy little dinners are especially delectable, as people reassemble after their summer disruption. Nowhere else is there such a diversified babble of holiday experience. Each one has something to relate, amusing or otherwise, according as Fate has been kind or the reverse. They compare notes upon the horrors of seaside lodgings, the extortionate rate of custom-house duty, the aggravation and delay of the whole system—varied by ecstatic reminiscences of the more tolerant, who prate glibly of the glories of the Rhine—of the dark pine forests, and the restless charm of the "tables."

Always in this chorus there is at least one jubilant yachtsman, but into his experience, who but "Black" dare penetrate?

From all this bustle of life Nora and Tom brought their very-much-alive vitality to bear upon the somewhat weather-depressed home circle, thereby inspiring renewed hope for the morrow.

"It will be too awful," said Dorothy at tea-time, "to be married in such a sulky mist as it has been to-day."

Everybody laughed, except poor Annabel; and Alec, who was carving a huge ham, observed philosophically, "Never mind, Dol; now the lamp is lighted, let's forget the weather. Bear up, and by this time to-morrow you will be oblivious to it—you are so sentimental, you know."

Here he dodged cleverly to escape a box on the ears, but Annabel could see no fun in anything.

The day before a wedding is always a period of chaos, wherein, if under the same roof, the impending bride and groom are wont to trail

about looking, if not bored, at least anxious for the dawn of a more settled day. And here were two couples; for one breakfast was to suffice, and it was ordered that both brides should start from the same house. But even such a day comes to an end, the hours can but run out their allotted course. At last it "ringeth to eventide." Nora watched Mab critically as she resumed her old place in the home with pretty matronly dignity. That Mr. Dyketon was not with them was a disappointment to her, and she guessed it was something more to poor Mab. For sharp-sighted Nora had not failed to perceive her young sister's distress on hearing that he had gone away without seeing them to make his adieus.

As we have tried to show, the girl was high-spirited, and the wound caused by this act rankled all the more. He had *gone away* when he might *have stayed*. There was the awakening, and to her pride this was all-sufficient.

Brought up in a common-sense school,

which, if unromantic, was at least healthy, Mabel Ellaby was eminently practical. She was no hysterical, undisciplined child to weep useless tears or indulge in futile outcries, thus yielding to what is, after all, but the relief of fools.

She returned from her London visit outwardly none the worse for the check her enjoyment had received. Only sympathetic Nora saw the quivering of the flesh and the shivering of the spirit. If the Countess divined anything, she, like the true friend she really was, discreetly held her peace. Two bracelets, one of coral and the other of pearl—gifts to the respective brides—were the sole representatives of this friend, so much missed and yet so rarely mentioned.

How often when the heart is full the tongue is silent ! And it is well.

Always at Mab's side was Malcolm Trench, with his wealth of love shining in his deep-set eyes, though no word of love-making ever passed his lips.

Mrs. Ellaby openly favoured his suit,

desiring nothing better for her child than his enduring affection, but she sighed when she saw how wilfully it was tested and strained well-nigh beyond bearing. She, mother-like, knew that here was a love that would wear through every trial, and she leaned on him in many ways as on one already her son.

Poor Mab, conscious of this, lapsed into an apathetic dulness, and she was tempted to submit, in sheer recklessness, to the creed "that what is to be will be."

It is open to question, had such undeviating worship been denied her, whether she would not have more quickly rallied to a true perception of how things were with her, while, as it was, she was petulant of his very allegiance, almost resentful of his calm reserve. In a word, she was unjust, and at times went so far as to deem him, with all his handsome looks and generous unselfishness, rather a poor creature.

Here she was manifestly wrong. Malcolm Trench was strengthening, week by week, under the probation of his love. The moral

nature of the man was being moulded by the prolonged trial. An easily-won conquest would have weakened the too compliant character, whereas this continuous struggle within himself strung up its stronger threads and coarser fibres into a whole that was near akin to nobility.

There was a ring at the hall bell which startled everybody, for the hour was late. A shuffling of many feet, interspersed with several coughs and a few nervous laughs, followed.

"It's the bag—the travelling bag," whispered Mab to her father; "see if I am not right."

She was quite right: there in the hall stood a motley, shame-faced tangle of men, and in the midst the veritable bullock-hide travelling bag.

"Another de-putation," again whispered Mab, saucily, as she followed Mr. Ellaby and the rest of the house party to the scene of action.

The honest fellows were all on the broad

grin, and several essayed, with much throat-clearing, to make the presentation speech ; but their nerve forsook them when face to face with the family.

“ Dashed if I can do’t, Master Frank,” said the Gunner ; “ never can—a set speech ’bout nothink ; and,” twirling his furry cap, “ as fer the Spider, he’s jest so cut up like as he fairly funk’d the job, and turned tail on us and went home—’sif he were a dawg wi’ a tin can tied to his tail.”

“ Git on wi’t, now youme begun,” said a deep bass, ironically, in the background, “ tho’gt as ’ow outside you was made o’ brass, for you talked ’s bold as bull-beef ; but, demme, ’twere but the tinklin’ o’ cymbals as the Spider ’ud say.”

An uproarious laugh greeted this remark, in which all joined, and even the Elf caught the infection. Whereupon the men gained courage so far as to say, “ As the newly-wedded wasn’t fer to open the bag till they’d fair started as man and wife, jest for to see like as how comfortable it

were fitted up even to eu-d'clong and 'air-grease."

"An' we all wishes yer well, all of us chaps," said a hearty old voice, "and all I asks is as 'ow the bride as is to be 'll shake hands wi' me, same as little Miss Mabbel did—I h'ain't forgot that yit awhile."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE VOICE THAT BREATHED O'ER EDEN.

MISS TOOLEY had come out very handsomely to both brides in the matter of presents, as evidenced by the two elegant tea and coffee services which was her idea of a suitable and useful gift to those who, on whatever scale, were beginning house-keeping.

"Dear girls!" she murmured softly, "I wish them both well;" and if a treacherous moisture filled the sharp old eyes, and dimmed for the time the lustre of those glittering articles, who could know its source?

"So far away to go," she said to herself, as she inspected the handsome travelling bag; and it cannot be denied that it was a grief to her that her pet beauty, Maddy Trench, would be so widely separated from

her. "Still," tapping the leathery sides of the bag, which in itself brought the distance so very much before her, "she will have a good husband in Frank Ellaby—a fine young fellow, very; and, after all, a girl thinks nothing of distance or travel when——"

Which, being interpreted, meant that there had been a time, long ago indeed, but well remembered for all that, when Margaret Tooley had been going even farther away to join the love of her youth; though none knew precisely how it was that the wedding dress of flowered brocade which had been bought—ay, and made, was never worn.

No doubt in not a few old-maidenly hearts there are many such unrevealed romances, which, if related, might be pathetic enough. But the fact remained that Miss Tooley's disappointed hopes made her tolerant of all young lovers, and more sympathetic with love affairs in general than she usually was with many other things.

She was known to be greedy of such news, and people dubbed her "a match-

maker," but Margaret Tooley little cared what folks called her. They were welcome to their opinion of her; perhaps, in her heart, she knew it was the one softening chord that atoned for much harshness in her character.

Had it not been for this memory of her youth, she might have developed into a soured and embittered old woman, for her tendency, as she frequently informed herself, was in this direction.

Margaret Tooley often took herself sharply to task on account of her several humours, and would wind up with, "Now, don't you be a fool, Margaret; at your age it ain't seemly or becoming, besides being fanciful and unwholesome."

She now looked brighter than ever, for she had of late taken a new lease of existence, for with her change of residence and varying interests had come a new phase of life to her. To be sure, she had not Jabez to worry and care for, and she missed him sorely at times, and now that he was dead

she gave him credit for more power of thought and action than she had ever yielded him while he was alive; but no such avowal was ever poured into human ear.

The full chime of bells in the steeple of Marsdon Parish Church rang out merrily very early on the morning of the auspicious day—a joyous peal, betokening that the ringers meant the whole place to wake up to what was about to happen.

The High Street was shaken out of its dull dignity, and even the shopkeepers beamed smugly on each other and the passers-by, as if the stir was something eminently good for Marsdon.

The “Blue Lion” was agog with business, and John Datchet up to his shaggy eyebrows in importance. The yard was full of carriages, which had come from far and near, for their own supply was scanty; and he was a proud man that day as he led the way out of the porch in a brand new suit—a joint gift of the bridegrooms—for he was to drive both

brides to church, and Mr. and Mrs. Frank Ellaby home.

He had stipulated for this, "as they was goin' away furrin, meanin' no disrespect to Mr. Danes and his wife, 'cos why? he should have, he did hope, many a chance of drivin' them agen." As he turned his dashing chariot, with its white linings, into the street, and proudly waved his new whip, with its floral bouquet—sent to him by the two brides—a cheer rose from the crowd of small fry there assembled, in which their elders, who were already wending their way to the church to secure a good place, joined with undisguised admiration.

The next carriage drew up before the residence of "Lawyer Trench," for they were going over to the Grange first, and then back to the church; and here was a buzz of excitement to catch a glimpse of the first ladies "as was dressed out."

"My stars, don't she look gran' and no mistek!" was audible, as Mrs. Trench appeared; but when Di came out with

Malcolm, the crowd pressed nearer, and the buzz deepened, for she obligingly lingered that they might see her dress to the best advantage.

The sun was in most lenient mood, and shone down in sparkling light on the pink tints of her robe, with its wreaths of autumnal leaves.

“Ain’t it spicky! and that ’ere ’at!” said a small street-urchin, his optics wide sprung with satisfaction, and Di laughed merrily as she seated herself in the carriage ere it whirled away.

Meanwhile, another had gone to pick up Elsie Snelling, and she had her little crowd of onlookers, as had also two more pretty maidens whom it took up, likewise arrayed in pink dresses and rich autumn leaves.

“And so the bells rang gaily O!” while these pink damsels were joined by two more, Mab and the Elf, in the wide old hall of Pendleton Grange.

The carriages rolled up to the principal entrance under a grand triumphal arch, which

had been a secret to all but Alec, who knew the men had been working at it from early dawn, and that a similar one, fashioned by the same hands, was erected over the church gate.

The edifice itself presented a marked and curious scene, for it was almost entirely filled by navvies, their wives, and families, all in their best go-to-meeting rig. Their honest faces were lit up by a mixture of gladness and personal pride in this especial function—albeit a shamefaced sheepishness overcame some at finding themselves in so novel a gathering. It might be that, had it not been for the superior pluck of some of the wives and daughters, many would have missed the sight at the last moment.

They gazed, during the long wait, with stolid decorum at the high fluted pillars and stained windows as “being too fine for such as they, except on this occasion, when, so to say, it was their own show.”

All was quiet and orderly, save for a subdued “H-s-s-h,” to a refractory infant, or

the suppressed giggle of some impatient youth of either sex. These were the only sounds that broke the stillness till the mellow peal of the organ announced the advent of the bridal party. The crowd rose *en masse* with a mighty rustle, as the bridesmaids arranged themselves on either side of the door simultaneously with the entrance, at the choir, of the expectant husbands and their respective grooms.

Mab could not resist giving many friendly nods of recognition, and Di Trench daringly followed suit, while the Elf looked shyly at the sea of strange faces. To her it was all an empty pageant, since one form was absent. She wondered if she was the only one who missed him, and, at the same time, resented Mab's gaiety and apparent thoughtlessness.

"She is all glitter and emptiness," said the child to herself, in hard-judging, jealous anger. "She does not care for him in the least as I do: to her everybody is alike."

And as she realised that her dear Dorothy

was going away from her—already she had recognised the fact that Dorothy's love for her was less engrossing—the tears welled up into the sad eyes, and the small figure shook with suppressed passion ; but not one in that closely-packed assemblage noticed her misery.

“It all would be so different for me,” she whispered to herself, “if my dear Mr. Dyketon were here.”

Perhaps, only perhaps, poor, lonely little Annabel!

As the two brides entered, Annabel would have liked to clutch at James Ellaby as he passed. She felt a frantic desire to be near to and have the support of some upholding hand. But somebody, she never knew whom, pulled her back into her proper position in the procession.

The ordeal was almost too much for James Ellaby, and he was conscious of a choking sensation as he saw himself surrounded by so many old faces. The stirring music, the rustle, and the indistinct buzz confused him and he hurried poor Dorothy so that he

pretty nearly tripped her up on the chancel steps.

At length it was all over—the last vows uttered, the final prayer read, and the vestry was reached.

Presently a big, not-to-be-repressed cheer rent the air as the two fair young wives came smilingly out into the clear sunshine—for there was no sulky mist to-day—and Frank Ellaby's hat was lively in response.

The horses in the waiting chariot, startled by the sudden noise, reared and plunged away from the kerb, and gave John Datchet a capital opportunity of displaying his skill in bringing them to what he called “up to Dick agen.”

The little delay was much appreciated by the crowd, as giving them an unexpected chance of seeing the beauties of the gleaming bridal satin, the filmy veils, the orange-blossoms.

The first carriage was off at last, and another cheer rang out for “Miss Dorothy,” as Clement Danes led her quickly forward.

But it did not upset the equanimity of this more sober pair of horses; perhaps they were too old for such folly, or too well-bred to give way to equine emotion.

“Bless her for a real beauty!” burst from more than one pair of hearty lungs, as Mab tripped forth radiantly on Malcolm Trench’s arm, closely followed by Di Trench on Alec’s.

All four of them laughingly responded, and one old navvy might have been heard saying to his missis in an audible aside, “That danged if afore long there medden’t be another double wedding, as he heard tell they was plaguy catchin’.”

One more round volley as James Ellaby appeared with Mrs. Trench, which dropped into a husky “God bless yer all!” as Mrs. Ellaby passed through them with “Lawyer Trench.”

It was the last straw for her, and she fairly broke down and sobbed aloud.

And Annabel Westgate, who had been somehow overlooked in the rush, cried too all the way home, as she sat in the over-full

carriage, wedged in on James Ellaby's knees. She never—no, never wished to go to a wedding again. It was so sad and pitiful to her, poor heart-sick child.

CHAPTER XV.

AFTER TWO YEARS.

Two years have passed, in calm, uneventful course, and Dorothy's boy is a year and two months old. A vigorous young termagant, to whom Miss Margaret Tooley is godmother and worshipper-in-chief, Master James Tooley Danes could do no wrong in her eyes, and it was perfectly legitimate (from her point of view) that he should tyrannise over everybody within doors and without.

And what tyranny is so exhaustive as that of a spoilt child?

People already shook their heads and suggested to each other that her folly was bidding fair to make of the lad a rod-in-pickle for her old age. From the time of his christening—when she fairly took him in hand—and during the period of his Cochin-China existence, known as short-coating,

until now, when he was promoted to velvet frocks and miniature Rembrandt collars, he had been her master.

It was only for the precocious young tyrant to splutter "Doolie, do this, or that," and forthwith "Doolie" did it, though Jemmie's father openly ridiculed and chided her for it.

"She will make the boy perfectly unbearable," he would say sternly to Dorothy; "you must not allow it—surely you have some authority over your own child."

Dorothy would shiver and coincide with her husband's idea, knowing all the same that she was powerless, and further, that he was equally so, and that he could not deny the fact.

"What can we do, Clement?" she would ask imploringly.

"The Lord only knows," he would answer in despair, as he escaped the discussion of the vexed question by driving off in his snug brougham.

Each monthly birthday of her boy was an

ever-recurring dread to Dorothy, for it was rigidly kept up by his godmother, and as relays of cakes and sweets were the principal attraction, the mother was at her wits' end how to keep the after-results from the doctor's knowledge.

Pleading, reasoning, arguing, were alike unavailing with Miss Tooley.

For some days previous to Jemmie's attaining the mature age of eighteen months, Miss Tooley was in unusually thoughtful mood, so much so, that she cut the Vicar and ran full tilt into a lamp-post, to the entire detriment of her new mantle ; for, as ill-luck would have it, the lamp-posts of Marsdon were just then having a fresh coat of paint.

"So much for abstraction," she murmured, ruefully eyeing the paint-smears on the rich silk, and forthwith she sought refuge in the business office of David Trench, from which she presently emerged with a beaming countenance and a lighter step. She had made her will, or rather had altered it, in almost absolute favour of her juvenile idol. But

of this she said no word to any one, and David Trench was little likely to do so, she thought grimly.

Her mind at rest, the child secretly her heir, nothing now apparently remained for Margaret Tooley but to devote her full time in rendering this interesting young specimen of humanity as important to himself and as obnoxious to other people as possible.

The number of sweets he consumed would have alarmed most nurses. A certain eruption round his wilful little mouth, which his baffled father peremptorily affirmed "did not call for medicine, but restriction of diet," was the only deterrent that held Miss Tooley in check; and Dorothy was at a loss how to act in a case in which even Clement's help proved ineffectual.

Mab, too, was against her, vehemently asserting "that were the child hers, she would certainly stop this interference;" while Countess Smalkington roundly upheld her by saying "that Mrs. Danes was lamentably

weak, and that Margaret Tooley was an old fool."

All this was very trying to the gentle Dorothy. She had only Annabel Westgate on her side, who indulged the child as much as Miss Tooley did, only in another way, which was a comfort, for picture-books and toys were not so disastrous in their effects as sweets.

Countess Smalkington had made up her mind not to go up to town this year, as Gwen did not care for it, being content to spend a fortnight quietly with her sister. When a letter came one morning from Lady Ju, asking Mab to come with Lady Gwen, and enforcing the invitation by adding that her husband would be exceedingly disappointed if she could not do so, nothing remained for her to do but to have Gyp put in the gad-about, and drive to the Castle, to hear what the two ladies had to say to it.

As she drove along the quiet lanes, she lay back indolently in the small carriage, and allowed Gyp to settle his own pace. The

consequence was that, being decidedly sulky, he ambled along but slowly.

The girl was altered, and yet the alteration in her was inexplicable to a puzzling degree ; for her dress and general air were as exceptional as ever, and when she roused herself to respond to the salutation of a passer-by, her smile and sunny glance were as bright as ever. But Mab Ellaby was not the same girl she was when she paid her first visit to Pendleton Grange a few short years ago. She was less sparkling, though perhaps more sweet and lovable.

The quieter life she now led, as the only daughter at home, might in some measure account for this. However, from whatever cause, there the change was—a subtle but very discernible one.

Mab had been very much worried of late, and, to tell the truth, was vastly anxious to accept this invitation, involving, as it would, a period of thorough change. “It will set me up,” she said, straightening herself in her seat, and giving Gyp a reminder that the

whip had not been left in the rack. "I shall be better able to forget the poor, foolish creature."

"The poor, foolish creature" was our old friend Mr. Kelpy, who, after blindly worshipping at a distance, at last frantically implored Mab to "marry him, or he should die." Even to avert such a catastrophe, Mab could not grant his desire, and so, to her genuine sorrow, the tiresome young man had gone away from Little Marsdon and had died.

There were some in his pastorate who did not hesitate to confess, now that he was no longer in their midst to be harried and distressed, "Ah! poor young man, we shall never get another like him; so clever as he was, too. Ah!" with pursed-up lips and much wagging of heads, "that flirting little Miss Ellaby at the Grange has had above a bit to do with it, *poor, dear young man*—a Christian, if ever there was one, and so delicate as he was. Of course, he *may* always have been consumptive—it isn't for us to say

as 'ow the doctor was wrong ; still, such things did hasten ends, let it be glossed over ever so ; we can only be thankful his death wasn't on our consciences." Their consciences, forsooth !

So ran the cackle and the sickening cant of this especial type of *good people*. How well we know it and its worth ! Would they worry and insult and perplex another less because this young minister was dead and gone to his well-earned rest ? Not a bit of it.

Mrs. Tempest valiantly took Mab's part whenever any of the chatter and self-righteous judgments reached her ears, for she knew well that since she had spoken out to the girl in her own best parlour she had been in no way to blame for the poor sick man's infatuation.

Another perplexity Mab had—her life was made up of perplexity just now. All this time nothing had been heard of poor Mary, although every conceivable plan had been set in motion to trace her.

Arthur Thistleden was the most active in

this search, because he wished in his heart—or in what with him stood in lieu of a heart—to be certified of her death that he might “do justice,” as the stock phrase has it, to Miss Nornabel, leading lady in the theatre of which he was now part owner and lessee.

Philip Dyketon, too, was unremitting in his labours on behalf of the Ellabys, but all were baffled. The affair lay shrouded in impenetrable mystery.

As Mab drew Gyp to a standstill before the Castle, two horses, or rather a horse and a pony, were led round, and Mr. Dyketon and Annabel Westgate came out together with Lady Gwen, who was hospitably speeding the parting guests.

“A lovely day, Miss Mab,” said Philip, cheerily, helping her to alight. “By-the-bye, when are you coming for that game of tennis?”

“At any time,” she answered, laughing up at him. “You know I went yesterday, but found you all out, so had to return lamenting.”

“ ‘ Any time ’ is no time, as evidenced by that unfortunate circumstance. Brownlocks, have I any engagement for to-morrow ? ”

“ No,” she replied ; then observing his puzzled expression, added, “ I am perfectly sure you have not.”

She said the words slowly, with a suspicion of her old quaint, childish precision which always amused him, and he laughed, “ Very well, then, Miss Ellaby, the net will be ready for our tilt to-morrow at any hour it will suit you to name.”

“ May Lady Gwen come too, to talk to me while you play ? ” asked Annabel, eagerly.

“ Will she come ? I presume you mean, child.”

“ Yes ; you know what I mean,” said she, blushing, to Lady Gwen.

“ Of course I do, darling—your stern guardian is severe to-day—and if Mab will call for me on her way, I will come.”

This settled, they strolled down the central drive instead of mounting imme-

diately. The day was soft and balmy, and the gentle breeze was tempting.

Annabel held her serge habit over her arm with singular ease for so young a girl. She was growing day by day in grace and beauty, and in a few years there would be no dissenting opinions as to her rare charms. She was very tall and slender for her age, without being awkward. There was ever a look about her of being "on guard," so as not to appear childish. Her constant desire was *to be a woman*; but, fortunately, she was neither priggish nor disagreeable under this self-imposed strain. She was naturally too refined and humble. In consequence of this undercurrent in her life there was a sweet, anxious gravity about her, very touching and extremely fascinating, while her peculiar eyes had a way of appealing from under their deeply-shaded lashes that commanded the same pity and sympathy which they had done when she was but a tiny mite.

The Countess had lately quite taken her up, and next to Mab Ellaby she was one of

her pet *protégées*. She was watching them now from an upper window as they sauntered down the wide gravel walk, the horses and grooms bringing up the rear. "Hum!" she said quizzically, as she wiped her glasses on the sock she was knitting, "Gwen and Annabel hand in hand as usual. The man—first fiddle in the estimation of 'em all—walks with Mab Ellaby." The glasses were duly adjusted over the high-bridged nose, and her self-communing continued briskly, "Soon it'll be Gwen and Mab hand in hand, and Miss Annabel Westgate—— Bah!" pettishly, "the slim hussie's but a child, and he—poor wretch, he don't in the least know that he's in love; he's as innocent of the real state of his affections as are those human bats who have never played at love in their lives—who have never dallied in the primrose path. There is," with a little snort, "such a thing as being *too pure*. I don't suppose, now," peering after the group as they rounded a clump of rhododendrons, "I could offend him more than by hinting at such a thing. Well,

I ain't going to, that's one thing. How the chit—an unknown waif—carries her habit! a sure proof of good breeding, and she's fast growing into a beauty of the very rarest type. I wonder," walking away from the window, with her hands behind her back, "who she really is? I *think*——" but here the old lady resumed her knitting viciously, and said no more till, once again in view of the drive, she saw Philip carefully lifting the object of her meditations into the saddle.

"And there's that foolish goose, Gwen, forgetting she's not as young as the other two, with not a bit of a wrap on, out of this warm room, too. She'll be wailing with neuralgia before long. Well, there's one thing I've missed in life, facial nerves and all the bother they bring in their train. And as for teeth, mine," grinning, "are as good as art can make 'em. Hum! neuralgia, I fancy, is a new name for an old sore, and it strikes me pretty forcibly is confined to women of poor Gwen's calibre. But, there!

as they say behind my back, I'm an old heathen."

The servant, with fresh tea, interrupted her ; and the girls arriving upstairs with it, Mab at once opened her business by showing Lady Juliana's letter.

"You know, dear Lady Smalkington," she said, "I am not altogether sure I ought to go, as I am due at Nora's in October."

"Hum!" muttered the old lady, and adding something about "preamble" as she perused the letter. "That ain't much dissipation, child. London in October is something like being in a disused house before the new decorations are finished ; and humbugging about indoors at the advent of a first baby won't tend much to lighten the situation."

"But I shall like to go then to be with dear old Nol," said Mab, quickly, not in the least offended at her old friend's bluntness.

"*Cela va sans dire*," with a crumple of the brown cheeks instead of a laugh. "But you may as well go and have a 'good time,'

as the Yankees say, first ; but, O Lord ! it won't be very riotous. Good times at Ju's are too much diluted with a sickly holiness—why, the very brackets and bell-pulls in the house savour of sacerdotal—ain't that the word ?—vestments."

"Now," cried Mab, with spirited insistence, "I won't let you rail about the poor man ; you know I like him very much, and he is really and truly in earnest."

"I dare say," said the Countess, not ill pleased with this defence ; "but it does tickle my fancy to picture Ju dressed up in that trailing serge gown and sanctimonious muslin cap, with that fearful apron clapped on so that the big cross can dangle on the extreme edge to the best effect. My dear ! it's too rich for anything."

After her hearty laugh had spent itself, she went on funnily, "But, there, they are happy enough under the humbug, and if you like to go and rest awhile in the odour of piety—why, go, Mab, by all means. What does Gwen say, eh?"

Gwen had left the room, as she did when practicable, to avoid her mother's jeers on this particular subject.

"Lady Gwen wishes me to go, and I do not think she would say so unless it were agreeable to her."

"Mercy, no, child; why should she?" Then leaning towards her, and lowering her voice, "And, Mab, you just put a spoke in the wheel if you notice any signs of her going over to their tomfooleries; I shall hold you responsible, mind. If she turns extra sentimental, and gazes vacantly at nothing, just you, for my sake, turn on the tap of ridicule, and bring her back from her mooniness to common-sense again. Poor Gwen! she always caves in under sarcasm."

Mab nodded acquiescence to these requests, and the old lady went on, "While I'm alive, at any rate—after I'm dead it won't matter—I want to be spared the sickly rubbish. But between you and me, Mab, Gwen's just the kind of woman—failing a sensible husband

to keep her in order—to daunder off in this direction.”

“I do not in the least think she will,” said Mab.

“I am not so sure, my dear, and I don’t so much care ; after I’m gone, if it’s any consolation to her, she can fill this old place with ritualistic gloom, and talk priestly twaddle to her heart’s content ; as for the church, I suppose I shall peer down from my perch aloft on it, decked out like St. Gudulph’s, and another ‘Deraclose’ meandering about the musty aisles in white satin. How about this new curate, Miss Mab ?” asked the keen old inquisitor, abruptly. “I hear he is already on your list of admirers.”

“Oh, Lady Smalkington !”

“Ah—oh, Lady Smalkington !” mimicking her. “But ’tis so, I hear.”

“From whom ?” inquired Mab, a little hotly.

“Hum,” noting the manner. “I heard it yesterday from that bibbering old Durnton.”

"Yes, indeed, it's quite true, Miss Ellaby," said Lady Gwen, coming in. "The Vicar dined here yesterday, and——"

"This was it, Mab," broke in the Countess. "Well—Coun-h-tess Smalk-h-ington, and how's your—ur—ha, no, h'm, ha, a' hum to-day?"

"Mamma!" said her daughter, seriously, "it is much too bad to make such fun of the dear old fellow;" but even she could not help smiling at the recollection.

"What *did* he mean?" asked Mab, laughing outright at the comical grimace that met her view.

"Couldn't make out, child, what there was of mine he was so anxious about, till, after unwinding about three yards of neckcloth, he proceeded to state, 'is your—er—ba-h-d co-h-ld.'"

"The *idea*!" said Mab, intent on diverting the conversation from the new curate.

But the Countess was not to be shelved in that way by Miss Innocence, and with another grimace wound up with, "And then

he told us with great relish 'that there wou-h-ld soon be a-no-h-ther wed-h-ding in the old church-h, for that Mr. Pau-h-l Dale-h-ton, his new cu-h-rate, was in love with my lit-h-tle friend Miss Ma-h-b Ellaby.'"

CHAPTER XVI.

DOWN IN THE TUNNEL.

WHEN Mab Ellaby drove Lady Gwen up to Marsdon House the next day, Annabel Westgate ran down the hall steps to meet them in great glee.

“Does she not look lovely?” asked Lady Gwen of Mab, in an undertone of startled surprise. Mab had no opportunity of replying, for Annabel was by their side, chattering eagerly. Her first words, as she shook hands and kissed them, were, “Mr. Ellaby is here—indoors with Mr. Dyketon, and he has promised,” here she clapped her hands, “*promised*—fixed it for to-morrow, so that I can be of the party, for I must return to school on Friday.”

“Fixed what, and promised what, my dear?” inquired Lady Gwen, laughing, as she descended from the carriage.

"Dear me, how stupid I am!" said the girl. "Of course, how is it possible you should know? but I do feel so excited about it. Mr. Ellaby is going to conduct a whole party of us, just as many as care to go, all along the line, and down into the biggest tunnel. Fancy! how *lovely* to go down the shaft in the skip!"

Lady Gwen, it must be admitted, did not perceive the peculiar loveliness. She had heard of "the skip," but had an idea it was some horrible hook or swinging seat at the end of a rope, to which no one who was not absolutely compelled would dare trust themselves.

Seeing her hesitation, Annabel explained, "You will not mind it a bit, dear Lady Gwen, it will be charming, and *quite* safe. It's a *huge* bucket," spreading out her palms, "into which four people can be stowed *easily*," bringing her hands together conclusively. "And, besides," for Lady Gwen still looked dubious, "Mr. Ellaby and Alec are constantly going down so, and the

navvies think nothing of it. After all, what is safe for them must be safe for us."

"Yes, dear," said Lady Gwen, quite meekly. "Have you ever tried it, Miss Ellaby?" she asked, turning rather a scared face to Mab.

"Oh, yes, it's not half bad, and I hope you will not shrink from the attempt—it's rather nice when you get used to it."

"I do not think I ever should—get used to it," said Lady Gwen; "but," seeking to reassure Annabel, "running along the metal rails, behind that pretty little locomotive, I shall enjoy."

But Annabel was not inclined to forego the inspection of the tunnel, and proceeded to expatiate thereon. "You see, dear Lady Gwen, there is no other possible way of seeing a tunnel in actual making, and oh! it must be so novel and interesting. There are three different shafts in Nincleton tunnel, and hundreds of men at work in them by the light of tallow candles."

"Dear me! three shafts! I am sure I

thought they began at one end, where mamma laid a stone or something, and bored and drilled away till they reached the other.

“No,” said Annabel, with the superior air of one better informed, “they sink shafts into what are called headings,” here Mab smiled, “and,” continued Annabel, nothing daunted, “you can hear the tapping of the tools in the other shafts, until presently a hole is perforated just large enough at first to allow the men to shake hands and clink spades through.”

“You seem to know all about it,” remarked Mab, looking quizzically at Lady Gwen.

“Alec has told me so much of it, and besides, Mr. Dyketon has a plan, which I have studied a great deal.”

“Oh,” said Mab, listlessly, at which the Elf drew up her slight frame into rather more stiffness than usual. Her sympathies had received a check. Somehow, Mab Ellaby always acted on the girl as a damper, and in

her presence Annabel was never so free or so lovable as with others.

"The navvies, I believe," said Mab, addressing Lady Gwen, "do not much care for women going into an unfinished tunnel."

"Why ever not?" asked her two companions, in a breath.

"I hardly know: they appear to have a prejudice against it—a sort of superstition that something will happen to it. I expect the feeling is akin to what sailors are supposed to have relative to beginning a voyage on a Friday."

"Poor fellows! then do not let us go," said Lady Gwen, with a sigh of very palpable relief.

"Nonsense," laughed Mab; "of course it will make no difference to our trip."

"Of course not," seconded Annabel.

Lady Gwen felt her last plank was being withdrawn from her, when Mr. Dyketon and Mr. Ellaby joined them, and Annabel's news was confirmed.

"And now, kitten," said Mr. Ellaby, "you

must bustle round and get your party made up at once. We start at eleven sharp, mind, from the old Cross farm."

"To-morrow?" inquired Mab, in some dismay, for she knew this meant much exertion on her part.

"Ay, at eleven sharp," said her father, forthwith marching off to the stables to get his nag, with Annabel running by his side to thank him yet further for the treat in store.

"We wondered why dad did not come home to luncheon," remarked Mab, as Philip Dyketon tightened the guys before commencing the game.

"Yes, I met him at Nincleton, and he came home with me, and then Brownlocks tackled him about this expedition. I look forward with some curiosity to escorting a number of ladies down a tunnel shaft."

"I do not think I *can* go," said Lady Gwen, with a shudder.

"Oh, yes, you will," he made quiet answer, "and you will be as brave as anybody."

A pretty colour flushed into the faded face

as she turned aside to watch Annabel returning after seeing Mr. Ellaby off.

"Say you will, dear," whispered the girl, coaxingly, putting her arm round her waist.

"I must positively only stay for one sett," said Mab. "I must drive into Marsdon, and ask all these people."

"And I must write a whole posse of notes," rejoined Philip, "for your father asked me to procure plenty of men."

They began play in earnest, which did not stop at the one sett. Another and another followed, till Philip declared "that sett and sett would never do, they must have a third to decide it."

The first two games of this fell to him, the next two were Mab's, and then it went evenly till "five all" was cried. Mab settled herself to serve for the last and decisive game with grim determination, when she perceived Mr. Dyketon nodding to some one, and on looking round, a little vexed at the interruption, saw the new curate shaking hands with Lady Gwen and Annabel.

“Do not let me interfere with your play,” spoke Mr. Paul Daleton, in a rich, pleasant voice, as he placed himself by Lady Gwen’s side.

He was a stalwart, good-looking fellow, with merry blue eyes lighting up an otherwise serious and very earnest face. He was, at first glance, to be depended on, to be trusted with confidence, and to be taken on trust.

Mab was one of those lucky people who always play better rather than, as so often is the case, worse under criticism, and the game was hotly contested, with an amount of energy that seemed quite uncalled for to Annabel Westgate.

“Clever little girl, Miss Ellaby,” said the young divine to Lady Gwen, in a tone of unqualified admiration, as a ball of hers swirled past Philip Dyketon’s racquet. One more serve, and the contest ended in her favour, and Philip Dyketon owned himself now fairly vanquished.

Tea had been ready some time, and

Harvey was in attendance with a nice cool cup for his prime favourite, Miss Ellaby.

Paul Daleton's handsome physiognomy became considerably elongated when it was understood the ladies could not even stop for one more sett, but must start at once.

"I hope you will join the party to-morrow, Daleton," said Philip, finishing his third cup of the cheering beverage.

"Pray do," Mab said gravely, as she met Lady Gwen's eyes fixed a little inquiringly upon her, thus reminding her of yesterday's conversation.

Paul Daleton accepted on the instant, though he did not in the least know to what form of party he was committing himself.

"You will have to descend a dreadful tunnel shaft, Mr. Daleton," said Lady Gwen, in her pretty drawling voice.

"That does not alarm me," bowing to her and smiling, so that he discovered the most perfect set of teeth any man could wish to possess. "You know I have come here straight from a mining country."

If he had not, he would have faced any horror of the kind to secure the presence of this bright, original Mab Ellaby, a girl of whose very existence he had been unaware a month ago, but now *loved*.

It was rather hard on him to watch the gad-about drive away instead of his having a turn at tennis, as he had hoped when, on descending a near hill, he saw play going on, and rushed home to put on his flannels quicker than ever he had changed clothes in his life before.

“If I had only been sooner,” he thought ruefully; and I am afraid he inwardly made ungenerous reflections on an old lady who had detained him to regale him with invectives against the parish doctor, because he had attended her for five whole days on account of her bad feet, and had *never once asked to see her tongue*.

It was a glorious morning—light, breezy, inspiriting, and a summer sun did all in its power to enhance the scene of our impromptu excursion.

A general sense of pleasantness pervaded everything, and great merriment was evinced at the unusual nature of the entertainment by the little groups gathered together at the Cross farm cutting.

Annabel Westgate was there early, her whole being instinct with pure enjoyment and supreme content; for had she not "her Mr. Dyketon" all to herself?

One could not but think, looking at the radiant young face and lithe figure, all a-quiver with delight, of the sadly short time youth lasts. How soon the buoyancy and glee are quenched by the hard, workaday reality of a mean world! How quickly the high spirit of a brave nature is called upon to do battle in the heat of the unworthy fray, where each one fights furiously for the front rank, or sinks into the background wounded, worsted, undone!

Some writer has truly said, and the words arrested my attention, "There is but one childhood to a human life, but one time of freedom from care, of exemption from

strife, of ignorance of life's bafflings, its meannesses, its complications."

Annabel Westgate was grave always, although her short life had been as free as most from childish trials. But at times it almost seemed, from her reserved demeanour, that she was no longer under youthful "illusion," but already wrestling with a foregone conclusion—that her life was to be full of care and perplexity.

Her mind was introspective, and these are never light-hearted and easy natures. With such, anxiety comes early and stays long.

It was so in this case. Annabel Westgate had her perplexities, and they remained with her, to trouble her with a sick anxiousness.

And then the girl—for at heart she was no longer a child—was thoughtful latterly of the peculiarity of her position. She had no parents, as had all her school friends. Her so-called home contained no acknowledged claim as a *home*, for in it were no ties that

could, by other than a mere chance, have been virtually hers.

She had been born in the house to which, as the vacations came round, she went as other girls did to their several homes, but in that house were no parents, brothers, or sisters for her, nor any kin.

It was a saddening experience, and behind that self-contained exterior storms of questioning and investigation arose.

How was it that she was so situated, and so compassed about by untoward mystery—a mystery which became more difficult to her day by day? The more so, that it was one of which she could never speak. Pride bade her be silent for *his sake*, if not for her own.

Once only had she spoken to him, one still quiet evening, when the heavens were studded with millions of stars, and the full harvest moon had flooded the terrace before Marsdon House with its effulgence. He had been so shocked and pained because he could give her no answer to her question.

All he could say—and he said it with shrinking difficulty—was, “Whose child are you, Annabel? You—you are mine, always mine; does not that satisfy you?”

But to-day her mood was gay to blitheness, and as she stood in proud content by her guardian's side, she was an embodiment of sweet mirth and happy youth. She scanned with unconcealed amusement each unit of the assembling crowd as they approached the meeting-place in twos and threes, and her brown eyes danced with fun as an over-dressed, affected young lady lisped to Mab Ellaby, “What a de-li-cious day it is! How per-fectly lovely it is to have just such an excursion!” As she spoke, she shook out the folds of a dainty blue cambric dress loaded with fragile lace trimmings.

“Yes,” answered Mab, “I dare say it will be a very novel form of dissipation for you; but I specially warned you,” glancing at the pale lace-covered costume, “to put on an old dress and thick boots.”

The young lady, a London suburban belle,

who was visiting in Nincleton, looked disdainfully superior at Mab's more serviceable get-up of thin blue serge, neatly made, and with no adornment save collar and cuffs of checked linen. Mab knew better than to expose pure white linen to the mercies of tunnel grit and engine smut.

"Well," she laughed, as she welcomed some arrivals, "if you do not mind ruining such a gown, that is all right ; but one is bound to return from these excursions considerably the worse for wear and tear."

"To say nothing of candle-tallow and waggon-grease," chimed in Philip Dyketon, with just a spice of maliciousness in his grave voice.

"Oh-h ! Mr. Dyketon !" Miss Egerton had heard all about this professed woman-hater and desirable *parti*, "you hor-wid man ! How *can* you speak of such dr-weadful things as tallow and waggon-gr-wease on a day like this ? it is wr-eally much too awful of you."

"They are veritable facts, I assure you,

and without them we should fare badly to-day," he replied, without in the faintest degree softening to her coquettish mannerisms.

"You are positively br-wu-tal, I declare," said the golden-haired belle, with an affected laugh and a supercilious glance at Lady Gwen, who, clad in a plain grey gingham and round black hat devoid of even a wing, came up just then.

This type of young woman was our hero's pet abomination, and he gladly turned to Lady Gwen; while Miss Egerton, as she removed her Louis Quinze heels a trifle farther from a heap of bricks and loose rubbish, mentally voted him "an old bear, and the woman a dowdy."

The dapper little engine was punctual to a minute, and behind it were open trucks filled with clean straw, over which Alec had placed boards covered with some strips of matting, and here and there a bit of crimson druggeting.

Mr. Paul Daleton's scheming to obtain a

seat by Mab was worthy of a better cause, although he may not have thought so ; but the result was satisfactory.

Having at the last moment dexterously handed over the young lady in blue to Malcolm Trench, he was free to leap in the hindmost waggon by Miss Ellaby's side.

The day for him, at any rate, began well. Not so with Mr. Trench, who was securely wedged in by the town belle and Ogilvie Snelling.

"Trust those curate fellows," he grumbled savagely, "for making the most of every opportunity."

"As an example, then, they are worth something," his fair companion said, snappishly.

Malcolm had not bargained for such acute hearing, and felt still more crestfallen.

"For my part," continued Miss Egerton, who, unsuccessful with the squire, was inclined to make the most of present chances, "I think clergymen, especially curates, most charming company. I am sure," affectedly,

"they always carry off the palm for the most w-racy stories."

"The deuce they do," murmured Malcolm, in carefully modulated tones, this time adding aloud, "I dare say you're quite right, Miss Egerton."

"Would it be at all worth his while," he thought moodily, "to flirt with this girl in the hope of vexing Mab? Would it trouble her in the slightest degree? Would it advance his cause one single atom?"

"Look ahead!" Alec shouted, as at a sign from Mr. Ellaby the engine stopped, and all the trucks jolted together, eliciting startled little shrieks from some of the ladies.

Some few minutes after, a crash was heard, a shower of earth and stones was hurled upwards, while dull smoke filled the air.

"Whatever is it?" lisped Miss Egerton, catching Malcolm Trench by the arm.

"Blasting the rock," he answered, as curtly as his natural politeness permitted.

He concluded that an up-hill flirtation

with this underbred girl was not worth the execution.

“Now comes the trial of nerve,” said Mr. Dyketon, when the engine again stopped, with a great rattling of truck couplings, and they perceived the “skip” swinging overhead in a line with the open shaft.

Mab valiantly led the way, closely followed by the Elf and Di Trench.

“You had better go down first, kitten,” said her father; “it will give the others confidence.”

So she was lifted in by Malcolm Trench, who rushed forward at meeting her glance.

“Thank you so much,” whispered Mab, sitting herself on the tarpaulin with which the rough square bucket was covered for the occasion.

All at once the sun shone more brightly for Malcolm Trench, as he realised what a jolly day they were having. While he steadied the swaying skip he wondered how he could have been such a jealous fool as to be out of temper with Daleton, and how glad he was

he had not been such an idiot as to flirt with that Egerton girl. In the blandness of his gratitude he even sung out to Daleton to hold the skip on the far side while another lady was helped in—no other than Lady Gwen, who had bravely taken her courage at the tide, and elected to go with Miss Ellaby.

It was a toss-up which should be the fourth, Paul Daleton or Malcolm Trench. Mr. Ellaby had hoisted himself in, and stood with one leg outside the bucket to make more room for the ladies, who were crouched below; but Malcolm, not to be outdone a second time, had placed himself so near that he could easily swing himself beside them. Mr. Ellaby, therefore, gave the word without further delay and they were on the move.

A terrified shriek rose from poor Lady Gwen as the skip veered round over the black chasm below, and began slowly to descend.

She clung frantically to Mr. Ellaby, but when she felt Mab's fingers close on hers she

rallied and uttered no sound till she was lifted out, more dead than alive, at the bottom.

“Indeed, I could not help it,” she said apologetically, as her feet touched *terra firma* once more.

“I think you have behaved very well indeed,” answered Mr. Ellaby, jumping into the bucket in order to bring down another load. “It is not a comforting sensation just at first to feel only a wire rope between one and a shaft of a couple of hundred feet.”

By the time the next four descended, Lady Gwen was quite herself, and keenly enjoying the strange, mystic scene in which she found herself. She could look with compassion at the girl in blue, who, pale with terror and trembling in every limb, looked the picture of misery.

At last they were all down and ready for a further start. Mr. Ellaby here led the way, preceded by men, torches in hand, who resembled condensed clouds. Lady Gwen took his arm and managed to proceed on her way with much more satisfaction than she

had feared. The rest were very merry, except perhaps Paul Daleton, who would have preferred guiding Mab Ellaby's steps without the aid of Malcolm Trench, and one other—a friend of Philip Dyketon's, who had been told off to see to Miss Egerton.

“Confound the girl!” he growled, as for the twentieth time he saved her from falling in the slush on either side of them.

It was not long before she made the agonising discovery that one of her shoes was missing, and was in great distress in consequence, as she and her unwilling escort were left behind in the dense gloom. Her escort, not being gifted with too much of the virtue of patience, asked her bluntly, “How she could dream of coming such a jaunt as this with low shoes on?”

“I don't know,” she sobbed pettishly. “I am sure I wish I had never come at all to the disgusting place, it's *horrid*.” In her extremity she even forgot to twist the *w* into the word.

Her companion, in his ill-concealed disgust, devoutly echoed her sentiments.

"Let's lift her on to this 'ere trolly, sir," said a gruff voice at their elbow—they could distinguish some burly forms and a low sort of movable platform at their side—"and then us chaps can trundle her along sharp to jine the rest o' 'em."

No sooner said than done, and Miss Egerton, of The Grove, Maida Vale, blue dress and laces, *suede* gloves and parasol, but minus a shoe, was whisked up by brawny arms smelling of tar, and squatted down on the strange conveyance which they called a trolly.

Furthermore, to her unfortunate attendant's relief, she was, as had been suggested, rapidly trundled along to join the rest of the party, and the amusement created by her triumphal entrance into their midst did not tend to cheer her in the least.

As a matter of fact, she was sulky.

"I say, Dyketon," murmured his friend in his ear, "I'll hand over my charge. As the

Dean said of the rabbits: ‘ Thank you, my lord, I’ve had enough.’ ”

It was not a happy day for Miss Egerton, who, like others of her kind, was inclined to measure a day’s pleasure by equivocal personal success.

CHAPTER XVII.

YES OR NO.

ON the next day Annabel left Marsdon House for school, but on the way she was to spend a little time with Lady Juliana and Mr. Deraclose.

“Oh, Lady Juliana,” she said, during the first evening with them, “will you be so good as to take me to a jeweller’s to-morrow?”

“To a jeweller’s, child?” asked that lady, with some surprise.

“Mr. Dyketon has given me a beautiful earring that once belonged to his mother, and he would like me to have it made into a brooch.”

“One earring, dear?”

“Yes,” explained the girl; “he supposes the other has been lost.”

“Ah!” said Lady Ju, “it was always

admitted that Mrs. Dyketon had some good jewels. Would you mind showing me this one, Annabel?"

"No, indeed," running away very willingly to fetch it.

"See," she said, raising the top of the small leather case, "is it not lovely?"

There it lay, a plain slab of dead gold, with a single diamond of purest water in the centre, beneath it a strange device worked in faint enamel.

Lady Juliana started when she saw it, and took it up quickly, to examine it more closely.

"Ah!" she cried out. "I thought so! 'A. D.' and a date on the back."

Her husband looked up, at her tone, from the review he was turning over. "Well, my dear?" he asked.

"It is Mrs. Dyketon's initials," explained Annabel, unable to account for such unusual excitement on Lady Ju's part. As a rule, she was so cold and unsympathetic.

"This earring is quite familiar to me; I

must have seen it before—but where?” glancing at them both in turn. “Certainly,” to Annabel, “I have never connected it with Mrs. Dyketon: who could have had it?”

She rubbed her bony forefinger across her forehead, but, apparently, it worked in no recollection.

“I don’t know, I am sure,” answered Annabel, smiling as she met Mr. Deraclose’s amused twinkle of amusement. And then a nasty premonitory chill struck upon her that stifled her mirth. Always impressionable, she shivered and stood speechless. Could it be that this was no laughing matter? Was there some mystery behind that simple jewel? The diamond seemed to question her like a searching eye.

Mr. Deraclose speaking, turned the current of her thoughts. She was grateful.

He had laid aside the *Contemporary*, and was standing by his wife. “It is a peculiar device,” he was saying. “I presume it has some meaning. The diamond is superb!” holding it under the lamp to

catch its rays, while its owner stood fascinated but repelled, wishing she could hide it away—that she had never seen it. “The thing is old-fashioned, and very valuable; be sure, Ju, have a care where you let Miss Westgate take it.”

The subject dropped. The earring was consigned to a well-known jeweller the next morning, to be made into a brooch, and Annabel Westgate had resumed her studies, but still Lady Ju could not rid herself of the impression that she had seen that peculiar old earring before, and then it was an *odd* one. Where had it been?

“And if you have, my dear,” asked her husband, who grew somewhat tired of the subject, “what then?”

“You know, Theo, I am not a fanciful person,” said Lady Ju, quite fretfully.

“As a rule, no,” he assented, with a wearied manner.

It was seldom his wife intruded on the privacy of his study, and in coming now she had interrupted, and perhaps fatally

dispelled, a fine flow of ideas he was committing to paper for future use.

"I cannot get the thing off my mind, Theo; yet it is so strange *why* I should worry about it; that is what vexes me so—*why* I should. The more I puzzle about it, the surer I am that I have seen it before——"

"Or its fellow," said her husband, making an attempt to return to his writing.

"Or—its fellow—Theo?"

Her tone was so worried, her plain face so puckered, that it increased his irritation, so that boredom overcame his innate courtesy, and he sharply begged her "to puzzle over the trumpery thing elsewhere than in his study."

To his surprise, she in no way resented his harsh remark. Her cold, pale countenance did not flush into warmth, nor did her colourless eyes flash as she quietly retired at his bidding.

But he was not left very long in the solitude for which he craved. The door

was once more opened to admit his wife. "Theo, you must forgive me." This was a most unusual tone for her to adopt, and he laid his pen aside to listen. He was angry but attentive. "I know now where I saw that odd earring, or, as you say, *its fellow*." A muttered sound, of which only "Conf—— the earring" was audible, from the reverend and very much annoyed gentleman. "That old Holmes whom I visit for you has, or had, one like it, in an old card-box, jumbled up with a lot of other queer trinkets and beads. I thought then that the 'A. D.' meant *Anno Domini*, as it headed a date. But Annabel Westgate tells us it is Mrs. Dyketon's initials. Annabel Dyketon her name was, Theo. The child, this foundling, was named after her; very foolishly, I consider."

"Very," he muttered, still straining to throw a mental lasso after those fine ideas she had recklessly put to flight. Tapping his fingers on the arm of his chair, he continued, "I cannot see anything at all

remarkable in the coincidence, Ju. But talk it over with your sister and Miss Ellaby, if you deem it necessary. I confess I don't."

"I do think it very necessary, Theo."

He sighed. "The only point that strikes me is," he said testily, "that it would be a thousand pities to have the one tampered with, and made into a brooch, if the other one—no doubt, at some time or other, lost and found in the simplest manner possible—can be so easily replaced."

"How clear-sighted and clever you are, Theo!" said his wife, very much comforted. "I shall go at once to Regent Street, and cancel that order—at least suspend it."

"That you might do," said he, briskly, catching at the chance of once more being alone. This time, when she went out, he politely opened the door for her, and on closing it again, softly turned the key in the lock before reseating himself.

Lady Ju ran lightly upstairs to dress, after ordering the carriage, intending to see old Holmes after calling at the jeweller's. But

remembering that her sister and Mab Ellaby would be with her on the morrow, she gave up that idea, contenting herself with a drive to Regent Street.

“Men are always so clear-headed and reasonable,” she said to herself as the carriage bowled smoothly along—“at any rate, the old fellow will be able to tell us how the jewel came into his possession, and that will be something.” This thought started into her mind at calculating how long a period must have elapsed since Philip Dyketon’s mother lost it.

Within his lodgings at Little Marsdon, Paul Daleton had written a very careful sermon, and what he hoped would prove a very telling one, for *she* would read between its lines he fondly trusted—that was, if she were at church at all on the Sunday, before leaving home for her London visit. He rested his head on his folded hands and his eyes sought the clear sky through the cottage window with its ivy tracery. How he loved this bright, cheery girl, with that tantalising,

indescribable manner about her that rendered her so totally distinct in his eyes to all others whom he had ever met. Would she ever listen to his love? Sometimes he dreamed she would, and again was sunk in despair that she would not. At times he fancied he read encouragement in those violet eyes; at others he discerned, under the drooping lashes, a depth of suffering meaning that troubled and saddened him. Could she be suffering? Surely she had never cared for the infatuated Dissenting minister whom, people said, had died for her. "Villagers must have something to chatter and gossip about," he said, half aloud. If she loved Malcolm Trench, what possible reason could there be why such love should not be crowned by an acknowledged engagement? for it was patent for all the world to see that he loved her. Paul Daleton's nervous fingers were locked hardly together as another consideration drifted into his mind. It was one not easily to be displaced, nor to be conjugated without difficulty. "Did

Dyketon love this girl? Did she love him?" If so, then all hope for his own cause was at an end.

As the scattered congregation assembled in the sacred edifice for that particular service, Paul Daleton sat expectantly in the vestry. Would the Vicar preach this morning, or he?

The arrangement between them was that he was always to occupy the pulpit in the evenings; but as often as not he had, at the last moment, to preach in the morning as well.

Once he had been taken unawares, and so had to deliver an extempore address, with Mab Ellaby's bright eyes immediately beneath him. To this day he knew not what subject he had chosen, or how he had carried it through without ignominious failure.

Would the old Vicar turn up this morning, or not? He hoped not, for he was sick at heart to deliver the sermon he had so carefully prepared, and that held between its well-studied sentences such a wealth of

meaning for one mind alone which should hear it.

The minutes passed, and he was still alone : hope grew big within him. The coast was clear for him, he would apparently take all the duty. He would preach that sermon with a force that never had been wrung from him before, and she would hear, judge, and—— What was that?

How well he knew the shuffling steps, the springing forward movement of the aged body ! Yes, the Vicar had come. He was looking better than usual. The pulpit would be his.

Paul Daleton's hand closed on that not-to-be-delivered writing of his till the veins of it stood up like cords. With a heart as heavy as lead he followed the old clergyman into the chancel, and entered the worm-eaten reading-desk.

Yes, she was there, her fair face thoughtful and tender, devoid of all trace of the merry mockery that mostly shone in it. Perhaps she was sad for the parting on the morrow,

or would she go away without one regret for him?

The schoolmistress was at her post at the wheezy harmonium. The thick-bodied and high-waisted school-children (who attained these distinctions through much eating of raw swedes) were hustling into their places behind her. The time was come for him to begin.

“When the wicked man” had just passed his lips, when he raised his eyes and saw Di Trench and her brother walking quietly up to the Grange pew. The rest of the wording escaped him with no meaning, “He shall save his soul alive” he uttered mechanically, before sinking on his knees to give way for a brief interval to the weariness that had entered his own. Instead of stirring other hearts by his own peroration, he sat on the stony seat in the damp chancel, while old Mr. Durnton, in a queer, roundabout fashion, expounded some theory relative to the ten tribes of Israel, to which Mab Ellaby listened apparently with undivided attention.

After service, as luck would have it, he was detained, so that he could not even speak to the Ellabys. He could only leave the church in time to see them disappearing, together with Malcolm Trench and his sister, across the field beyond the stile.

Visions rose before his mind of their cosy dinner; an afternoon in the tangled orchard, among the apple blossoms, now in full beauty; a long evening, a family tea, and—perhaps—who could say?—lovers' talk and love's caresses.

The agony of it was unendurable, and he turned hurriedly aside to his lonely lodging, where a plain and equally lonely dinner awaited him.

After that there was, for him, a two-mile tramp to an outlying hamlet, a service to hold to a handful of half-asleep old men and women, and a dozen or so lads and lasses, who were all longing to be free, that they might rush forth into the spring-laden air, and saunter hand in hand—as is the mode of country lovers—through the leafy copses or

by the murmuring stream. "And what," he asked himself, with a shade of bitterness, "can a poor curate of the Established Church want more than all this?"

The field passed, Mab and Alec, with their companions, separated in the narrowing roadway, Alec to join Di Trench, Mab perforce to drop behind with Malcolm.

The foremost couple were gay and to spare, to judge by the ready laughter and merry quips they exchanged, to while away the time.

These two always chattered blithely, and now there were, with them, no ominous pauses that are so eminently suggestive of deeper meaning, or some unsettled definitions, that are, so to say, milestones on love's highway.

Their confab to-day was wholly irrelevant—quizzing of various small things connected with the service, with the attitudes of several of the congregation, with the doleful cast of the curate's face, and with mocking query as to what poor, dear old Durnton's almost

tearful allusions to the shortcomings of Lot's wife could have to do with those perversely scattered ten tribes of Israel.

Suddenly Di stopped and turned sharply round, crying out, "I say, Mab dear, *did* you notice the Vicar's tragic remarks about the wa-h-arps and wo-h-ofs of destiny—wasn't it awfully fine? And——" But the merry voice ceased, for Mab was not even listening, and Di Trench wheeled round to Alec with a world of meaning in her healthy, blooming countenance.

"Oh, dear, dear, dear," she said, "how stupid Malcolm is! Don't you think—oh, Alec, *don't you think* that Malcolm *is* awfully stupid?"

They had looked back, and had seen Malcolm Trench and Mab Ellaby standing still under a spreading beech-tree. He was pleading earnestly, while she—was silent, with no blush on her cheeks, no relenting in her air, but with sorrow written on her prettiness as clearly as fate, destiny, or whatever it is that hoists these signals, could show it.

“Oh, Alec dear,” said the vivacious Di, walking on rapidly, “why could he not wait? It is all that horrid Mr. Daleton’s fault for falling in love with Mab. I hate interfering with people, don’t you? It has made poor Malcolm desperate, and men *are* so silly; they won’t play a waiting game.” How little she realised what a waiting game poor Malcolm had played! “And they won’t take their sister’s advice, and now Maddy will partly blame me, I know; as if I could talk to him as she used! Of course I can’t; he doesn’t mind a word I say. Alec,” stamping her foot, “do say something to soothe me, it’s terrible to feel as I do.”

But Alec, who was miserable himself, had nothing to say except that “they may be talking of something quite apart from what you imagine.”

“Bosh!” said Di, tearfully, “you know as well as I do that he is praying Mab to marry him—yes, *praying* her to, and that she is saying a nasty cold, stony No.”

“I don’t fancy,” said Alec, who was

evidently expected to say something, "that she was speaking at all."

"Alec Ellaby," said Di, severely, "tell me exactly *what* you *do* think, if it is," with a sobbing little quirk, "ever so hard. Will Mab say Yes or No to my brother? If she says No, it will"—here she became tragic—"kill him."

"Oh, no, it won't, Di; and, besides——"

"Besides what?" and Di's black eyes shot fire at the hesitating slowness of her boy-lover's speech.

"She—may say Yes."

"Now, Alec dear," she went on, repenting her impatience at sight of his trouble, "why are not people simple and jolly, like you and me? Why do they get into such messes of doubt, and all that? It is such nonsense, falling in love and getting into such passionate moods. It upsets everything. As if just liking each other ever so was not enough, and a deal more comfortable."

"But, Di—you know, some day we——"

"Ah, well, Alec, I dare say, 'some day,'

mimicking his alarmed tone, "we shall get married, and all the rest of it, but I don't see why we should torment ourselves, and everybody else, with worries beforehand. When people are once in love, it seems to me they are immediately crammed full of worries, doubts, fears, and all manner of bothers."

For days past Malcolm Trench had been nerving himself to put his fate to the touch with Mab Ellaby. Would he win or lose? Since Thursday, when she had been so patient with him, on that excursion, his courage had risen, and his desire for her love and submission to him became irresistible. Whatever were the issues, he must now know the truth. He must feel the bliss of gain, or confront the misery of loss.

He took Madeline's sisterly advice, and had waited—although with set determination—whilst he had only Mr. Dyketon for a possible rival. But now his credence in this possibility was shaken to its foundation. Even Maddy may have been wrong. Girls did not always understand each other. Here

was another claimant in the field—a fellow dangerous in every sense—young, handsome, and of a strong will and mature character, as was not hard to see.

And Mab did not repulse him ; on the contrary, she rather more than tolerated his marked attentions.

Long afterwards he had learnt the name of the strange man to whom she had given tea in the orchard, and new hopes arose, from the fact that the intruder might be the cause of a complication which would ultimately drift her and Philip Dyketon wider apart.

Such unworthiness of thought is ever in the train of a jealous love, and Philip Dyketon was a proud man, fastidious in his notions. He would hardly care to marry into the same family where Arthur Thistleden had thrust himself.

Then, in her distress, when that mad Kelpy had so desperately urged her to marry him, Mab had turned to him for support—had been humble and so stricken

with shame and sadness that he had been on the brink of asking her to end it all and marry him. He scarcely knew what had stopped him.

But now, with Daleton, such a different wooer, on the scene, the whole position was altered. His undisguised intentions assumed alarming proportions to Malcolm Trench ; to any longer remain silent would savour of tameness rather than dignity. Was the steady love of years and his calm patience to have no effect on this woman whom he coveted for his own ? Was he to let her slip away from him through a craven fear of speaking out plainly to her all that was in his heart ?

He pleaded his cause manfully and well under the spreading beech-tree. He poured out the pent-up torrent of his love to her till she felt dizzy under its absolute truth, strength, and depth.

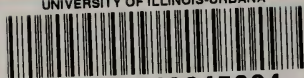
She stretched out her hands to him at last with a yearning cry as of one in pain—almost in fear. She reeled, and would have

fallen to the ground, had he not caught her. He held her tenderly in his strong arms ; their eyes met fully as the girl gave a long, quivering sigh ; but—his lips never met hers.

END OF VOL. II.



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